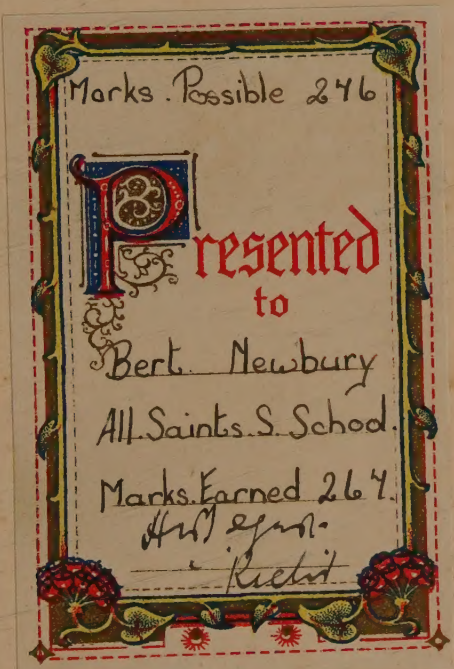
BY·AIRSHIP TO·THE TROPICS

ROWLAND·WALKER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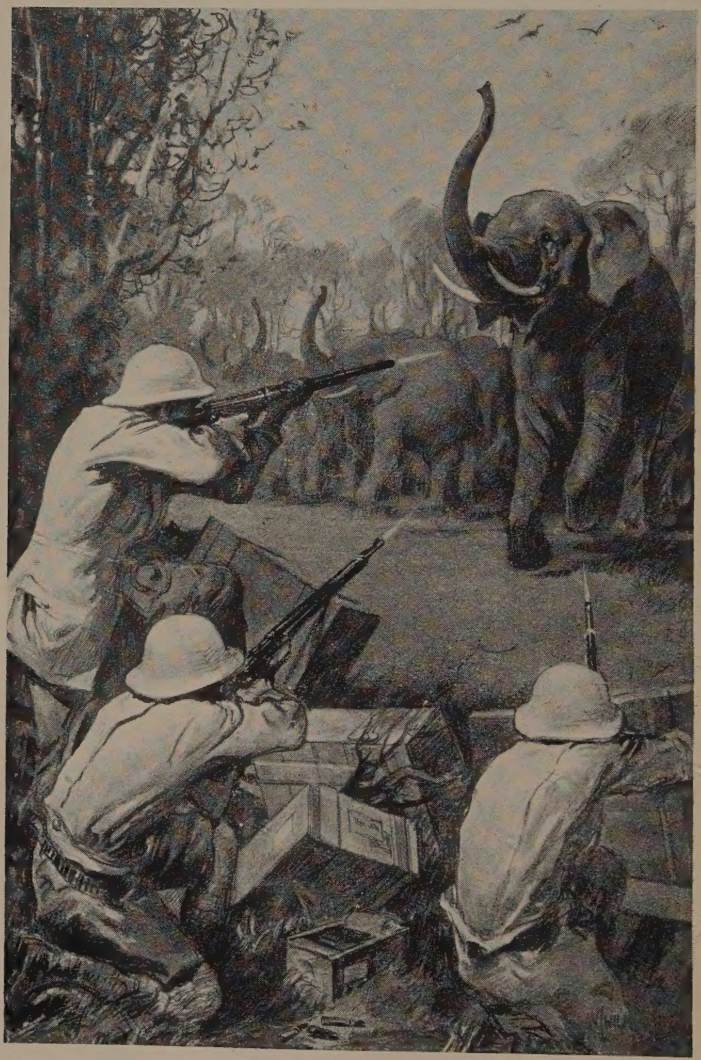

"'Fire!' he cried in ringing tones. Again the three rifles spoke together," (Chapter VIII.)

By Airship to the Tropics] [*Frontispiece*

BY AIRSHIP TO THE TROPICS

The Amazing Adventures of Two Schoolboys

BY

ROWLAND WALKER

Author of "Pickles," "The Phantom Airman," "The Treasure Galleon," etc., etc.

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TO

MY OLD SQUADRON-COMMANDER

(THE FLYING WIZARD)

MAJOR HORACE B. DAVEY, R.F.C., M.C., ETC.

THIS STORY IS DEDICATED.

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CHAPTER I

THE HOLIDAYS ARRIVE

THE great bell at St. Chad's clanged out the hour of nine. It was a delightful July morning, and down in the quadrangle below the excitement was tremendous.

Sturdy boys from twelve to sixteen ran hither and thither, carrying portmanteaux, kit-bags, fishing-rods, cricket-bats, etc. The glorious summer holidays had come at last, the July exams. were a thing of the past, and the next eight weeks were to be crowded with glorious adventure under the summer sun.

"Good-bye, Dan, old fellow," cried Geoffrey Hunter, wringing the hand of his chum. "Don't get drowned in that little sailing-dinghy of yours, or we shall want another centre-forward for the soccer team next term."

"Cheerio, Geoff," replied Dan, "and be careful of that new gun of yours when you go on the moors next month. If you're missing next term, hanged if I'll play footer with the team at all."

"Kennedy . . . Dan Kennedy!" shouted a voice above the hubbub and laughter of the departing boys.

"Here, who calls me?" replied Dan.

"Your brother Jake is waiting for you," cried a stalwart youth belonging to the Sixth. "He's been searching for you this last five minutes. Here he comes."

"Where on earth have you been, youngster?" asked Jake, a fine strapping lad of sixteen, with a strong face and a firm chin.

"Just been saying good-bye," replied Dan, who was about a year younger than his brother, and, although strong and wiry, was of a slighter build.

"Hurry up, then. The bus is waiting, and we mustn't miss the train in London, for I've just received a telegram from father which promises some excitement."

"A telegram?" echoed the younger boy.

"Yes, but come along now with that luggage. Here, give me your kit-bag and your cricket-bat."

And the next moment the two boys were shouldering their way through the boisterous crowd towards the waiting motor-bus. They managed, somehow, to find a seat ultimately on the mountainous pile of luggage with which the vehicle was already stacked.

"Good-bye, Jake! Good-bye, Dan . . .!" roared a dozen voices. Then the lower school, recognizing two of their heroes, took up the shout, and gave vent to an enthusiastic cheer as the bus started.

When a long-expected day like this arrives, even the most turgid and dumpy youth becomes excited. Hilarity, moreover, is just as catching as the measles, and excitement becomes the most natural thing in the world.

This morning, however, there was method in their madness, for Dan's wonderful performances during the cricket season, and Jake's cross-country championship, which had been outstanding features of the term

had won the hero-worship of every boy at St. Chad's.

"Three 'hips' for the Kennedys!" shouted Jack Winter, as soon as he spied the boys on the pile of luggage.

They were given with right good will, and the next moment the motor-bus was whirling along the road, the faint echo of a return salutation coming from the inmates above and below stairs. As soon as this bustling excitement had subsided sufficiently for his voice to be heard, Dan returned to the subject of the telegram.

"What does the pater say, Jake?" he asked.

"He says we mustn't miss the 12.45 from Paddington," replied the elder brother, producing the crumpled telegram from his pocket. "He will meet the train at Plymouth, and that——"

"What else?" asked Dan impatiently, as the bus jolted and swerved going round a corner, toppling down a pile of luggage, which Jake with some difficulty saved from going over the top.

"Says he has a very great surprise in store for us."

"Gee! I wonder what it is," said Dan wonderingly.

"He doesn't say, but it's just like the pater to have some little surprise for us. I believe he just lives for the long vacation. You remember what a topping time we had last year!"

"You mean in the yacht, the *Black Susan*, which he bought for us!"

"Yes," replied Jake.

"But it can't be another trip in the boat, for he's sold it. I wonder what it can be this time," said Dan.

"Perhaps we're going for a motor trip around the British Isles."

"Or a six weeks' fishing expedition on the Irish lakes and rivers."

"Maybe the pater's fixed up some good shooting on Dartmoor," ventured Jake, who was not a whit less keen and excited than his brother.

But when the boys had run through the whole gamut of adventurous possi-

bilities, they were both as far from guessing the truth as it was possible to be.

"I give it up," said Dan at last. "Here's the station. I'll see to the luggage if you'll get the tickets to Euston."

They were soon speeding towards London, which they reached in ample time to catch the 12.45 from Paddington. And while the Devon and Cornwall express is racing towards Plymouth, it may be as well to introduce the reader briefly to the indulgent parent who was just as eager to see his boys as they were anxious to greet him, and hear from his own lips what this wonderful adventure was to be. For that it was some mighty adventure both lads were quite willing to believe.

Major Kennedy, a fine military-looking man of some forty-five years of age, had held the post of Commissioner in Northern Nigeria for several years, until the death of his wife had left him a grief-stricken husband unable to carry out his arduous duties. Five years ago he had returned to England with his boys, whom he had

sent to school, while he had offered his services to his country during the war.

He had desired to become a pilot in the Air Services, but his health not having sufficiently recovered, he had to be content with some administrative duties, carried out in the airship service on the south coast.

Active and fond of sports, an open-air life had been recommended by his physician as the only possible avenue to perfect health. Keenly desirous of returning to Nigeria, if only to look once more at that lonely grave under the cluster of palms beneath a tropical sky, he had conceived a very original idea.

Only a month previously he had been visited by an old friend, Professor James Spencer Gregory, F.R.S., etc., an eminent naturalist, about fifty years of age, who had risked his life in almost every quarter of the globe in securing exquisite orchids, rare fossils, and the more minute specimens of zoological interest. Professor Gregory was rather a quaint-looking, shrivelled, gaunt, bespectacled man above the medium

height. The malignant fevers he had endured in many lands had left him little flesh on his bones, and his skin was yellow and wrinkled. But his strength was still considerable, and his courage indomitable, while his knowledge of the fauna and flora, bone-beds, tropical plants, native races and languages, made him an intensely interesting companion.

His first introduction to Major Kennedy was during one of the professor's journeys into the Nigerian hinterland, where, accompanied by three or four natives, who carried his provisions and specimen boxes, he had lived for months amid the jungles and mangrove swamps. The Commissioner, on that occasion, had been able to render him a service, and ever since that day the two men had been fast friends.

When they met again, therefore, at Mr. Kennedy's house at St. Mary's in Devonshire, they had naturally talked a good deal about recent developments in that interesting British colony. The enthusiasm of both men had been aroused, and the conversation finished somewhat as follows:

"Do you know, Kennedy, I should like to visit the hinterland of Northern Nigeria again, before I get too old."

"And why not, Professor?" asked his friend, leaning forward in his chair, and looking eagerly at his companion with an almost challenging countenance.

"Think of the time and the trouble of getting there, Kennedy. The shipping lines are so disorganized that it is almost impossible to get a berth nowadays, not to mention the cost."

"Bah! it was never so easy as now, Professor," replied Kennedy, whose thoughts were always turning to that little grove of trees so sacred to him.

"What do you mean?"

"Simply this—before the war it meant at least twelve or eighteen months even to do a bit of elephant shooting or big-game hunting. Now, it is a matter of six or seven weeks."

"My friend, I fail to understand you. Please explain," returned his visitor, looking askance at his host.

Major Kennedy laughed good-humouredly, then said: "To-day, thanks to the wonderful progress made in aviation, you can leave England in comfort, explore Central Africa in an arm-chair, and keep an iced drink at your elbow all the time."

"Ah, you mean of course to travel by aeroplane."

"No, no!"

"How then?"

"By hiring a Blimp, or a small N.S. Airship of the improved Zero type, which can carry from ten to fifteen men. These airships have done flights of over sixty hours with comparative ease," replied the major, who had thoroughly examined this question from every point of view.

"I see—but go on. I am interested," urged his friend.

"An aeroplane must land frequently, and must have a suitable landing-ground. A Blimp, which is really a sort of a yacht of the air, is ten times safer, especially if filled with helium instead of hydrogen. It can cruise, it can hover fifty feet above

the ground, or it can rise to dodge a storm or find a favourable current of wind. It consumes very little petrol compared with an aeroplane. It can stay in the air for almost any length of time. It can be moored to a tree at night, and its occupants can descend by a rope ladder."

"Wonderful, Major!" interjected the naturalist. "You are making the sap to rise in my dry bones. Pray go on, for I can see that you have studied this subject exhaustively and, I should say, that you yourself intend to take a trip one of these days."

"That I certainly do, my friend. No more toiling through fever-smitten jungles and mangrove swamps, dragging heavy loads under a blazing sun and dying for a drink of water. The next time I visit Central Africa I shall study the landscape at leisure from an arm-chair on the deck of an air-ship, and land occasionally for a little shooting when we sight a herd of buffaloes, elephants, or any other big game. I shall stalk them from the air, and, who knows,

perhaps I may even find that ancient hidden city, buried for centuries . . ."

"Ah! you mean the long-lost city of Nophar."

"Yes."

The professor remained silent for a couple of minutes, while his thoughts ranged over the wide possibilities of this wonderful adventure. Then he said:

"And the airship, Kennedy? Can you find it?"

"It is moored at Cattewater aerodrome, not fifteen miles from here. The start could be made from there. Captain Martin, the famous airman, who flew thousands of miles during the war, has long been urging me to some such adventure. He would navigate the vessel, aided by a trusty mechanic, one Macpherson, a flight-sergeant who served with him in the Air Force. He declares that the cost, even supposing we should never find the buried treasure in the lost city of Nophar, would be more than covered by a little trade in ivory and gold dust. He is eager for me to accompany him,

because he thinks that my position as late Commissioner in Nigeria would be of some assistance to us."

"Kennedy," said the professor, rising and stretching out his hand, "it is all very wonderful, and I have only one more question to ask you: when do we start?"

The major rose also, laughing heartily, and gripped the hand of his eminent and respected friend.

"I have had it all arranged for weeks," he said. "But I have been waiting for the long vacation, and the return of my two hefty boys from school. They will be immensely excited when they hear of it. It will be perfectly safe to take them, and they will be very useful to us. Besides, they were both born in Nigeria. It is almost like taking them home, and their poor mother sleeps out there."

"My poor friend," said the genial scientist, laying his hand on the major's shoulder, for he had noticed the faltering tones as his companion spoke of his wife. "No wonder you wish to return. Half your

life lies buried in Nigeria. We will go if only as a pilgrimage to the grave of that heroic woman who sacrificed her life to be with her husband and children. Your wife was the bravest Englishwoman I have ever met, and I am glad for your sake that I was able to be with you during that great sorrow."

Major Kennedy did not reply for a moment. His heart was too full for words, but he pressed the hand of his friend. Then, recovering from his feelings as if by an effort, he said:

"Thank you, Professor! The knowledge that you will come with me is another proof of your friendship and devotion to myself and my poor wife."

"Will you take the boys?"

"Certainly. They are almost men now both in stature and courage. They will be home for the long holidays in a month's time. I am keeping the affair as a surprise adventure for them. They will be most useful to us, and it will delight them beyond measure," said the Commissioner, who never

dreamt of taking a holiday without his two hefty sons.

"Then I will return to London on Wednesday, cancel a few appointments I have made to lecture in the country, make all my arrangements, and return here within another fortnight."

"Excellent!" concluded his friend.

The month passed very quickly. Preparations were pushed rapidly forward for the expedition, and the day came at length when, towards the end of July, the boys of St. Chad's scattered to every quarter, for the glorious summer holidays had arrived. Dan and Jake, filled with the boundless exuberance of youth, were already being whirled towards Plymouth.

The crumpled telegram lay before them. It had been read over a score of times, but still they continued to discuss it as the train raced towards Exeter.

"Did you say that Professor Gregory had recently visited St. Mary's, Jake?" asked Dan.

"Yes, he spent a few days with the

pater about a month ago, and was returning again shortly," replied his brother.

"He's the great naturalist and fossil-hunter, isn't he?"

"Rather! He's quite an explorer too, been where no white man has ever been before. He visited us in Nigeria, you know, when you were quite a youngster."

"I remember him," said Dan. "Rather a gaunt, thin, wiry man, with his skin shrivelled to a brownish yellow. Looks as if he's lived a good deal in the fever jungles."

"So he has. But the pater thinks no end of him. Says he's the cleverest man he's ever met, and quite a globe-trotter. But why do you ask?"

"Because I think that this great surprise has something to do with him," said the more thoughtful boy.

"Christopher! but I shouldn't wonder if you're right, Dan. The pater's got some exploring trip in his mind for the holidays, perhaps."

"That's it!" replied the younger boy. "Some exciting little adventure, Jake. Hooray! I do wish we were at Plymouth."

CHAPTER II

A GREAT SURPRISE

IT was towards the close of a long summer's day when at length the Cornish Riviera express, drawn by a powerful Atlantic engine, drew up at Plymouth station.

"There's the pater, Dan!" yelled Jake Kennedy, stretching half length out of the window of a forward compartment.

"Where?" gasped his younger brother, trying to squeeze his head out of the open window in order to get a glimpse of the platform.

"He's coming through that crowd there. He's seen us. Out with the luggage, Dan."

And the next moment, even before the train had come to a standstill, Jake flung open the door, hurled out a portmanteau, two kit-bags, and a few smaller bundles, then leaped from the compartment, followed by his brother.

The meeting between father and sons,

where the bonds of union were so strong, the sympathies and affectionate regard so real and unaffected, may be better imagined than described. The warm greetings on both sides were truly British. Major Kennedy was proud of his boys, and they were equally proud of him.

"Did you get my telegram, Jake?" were his first words after the greetings, as they all struggled along the platform with the luggage.

"Yes, and we've both been dying to hear what's in the wind, Father," replied the elder boy.

The major laughed. He loved a mystery, and his pent-up excitement over the forthcoming adventure was not in any way less than that of his boys.

"Is it a yachting trip, Pater?" asked Dan, as he slipped his arm through that of his sire, while the luggage was being piled into the rear seats of the panting six-cylindered Mercédès, which the major had brought from St. Mary's to convey them home.

"Well, yes, it is of a sort, Dan," replied

the major with a mischievous smile on his lips as he took the wheel, and the boys squeezed themselves into the confined space of the front seat.

"Of a sort?" echoed Jake.

"Yes, but there aren't any fixed boundaries to this yacht. It can cruise anywhere."

"I d-don't quite understand," said Dan, looking up into his father's face, as the engine of the motor opened out, and the car sprang forward.

"We're going for a cruise, anyhow," concluded Jake, satisfied that the call of the sea which was in his young blood was going to be satisfied.

"Yes, we're going for a cruise all right," chuckled the bronzed man at the wheel, still stoutly defending his secret. "But what sort of a cruise do you think, boys?"

"In a sailing yacht," hazarded the elder boy.

"Yes, we're going in a sailing yacht too," assented the major. "But we're going to sail over the land."

"Over the land!" exclaimed both the boys in the same breath.

"Yes, and over the mountains too, and the forests and——"

"I've got it," announced Jake.

"Well?"

"An aeroplane!" Dan fairly shouted, and the faces of both the lads lit up with an intense glow, for they were both as keen as mustard on flying machines, and had constructed models galore, of almost every type of aeroplane which had been flown during the last few years.

"Yes, that's it. How ripping!" concluded Jake, stretching behind Dan to give his father a pat on the shoulder to express his delight.

"Wrong!" laughed the tormentor at the wheel, shaking his head vigorously, then turning to glance with twinkling eyes at the look of disappointment which now overcast the countenances of the crestfallen lads.

"I give it up!" said Jake, leaning back with folded arms, his whole demeanour

expressive of his intense mortification. A long aeroplane trip would have delighted the adventurous youth, more than anything else.

"Father, look, you've taken the wrong road. You missed the turning back there," said Dan.

"I don't think so, Danny."

"But I'm sure of it. I thought we were going home."

"Well, yes, but we're just going down to Cattewater to see the yacht first. She's at anchor down there, and I thought you'd like to have a glimpse at her before it gets too dark," said the major.

"At anchor," sniffed Jake, becoming curious again. "Then it is a 'thing' that sails, after all."

"Yes, I hope we're going to sail seven thousand miles in her during the next six weeks," replied the tormentor, who was now driving rapidly in the direction of Cattewater aerodrome on the Devonshire coast.

"Gee! It must be—but no, I won't guess again," resolved Jake. "I shall only

be wrong, for you've wrapped up this little mystery so well, Pater, that it's no use attempting to solve it. I'll just wait and see, though I'm tingling all over with excitement to learn what's at the end of this tangle."

Major Kennedy smiled, but he forbore to speak. He knew that the mystery would soon be ended now, and he himself at this moment was just bubbling over with suppressed merriment, anticipating, in his own mind, what the two lads would say when they knew.

Five minutes' silence ensued, during which the car panted and raced towards its immediate destination. Then as they came in view of the aerodrome, from which so many submarines were strafed by the Blimps during the war, Jake exclaimed:

"What a lovely little airship that is riding over there, Father! Isn't she a gem?"

"Yes, she's a beauty. Can you make out her name? It's painted on the side in black letters on the silver background," said Mr. Kennedy quietly.

"Yes, it's '*ZERO*-99,' Pater," cried Dan, who first made out the mystic figures.

"Do you think they would let us look over it?" asked Jake, forgetting about the yacht for a moment. "It's moored quite close to the ground. You know the officials at the aerodrome here, and I should dearly like to set foot aboard her. Do try them!"

"Right-o, if you wish it," assented the major, turning his car towards the entrance of the 'drome, and passing the sentry with a nod of recognition.

The next moment, leaving the car on the tarmac, they passed through the hangars, where Major Kennedy appeared to be well known, crossed the green turf, and came up close to where a group of men were busy, under the direction of Captain Martin and Professor Gregory, packing away into snug corners of the little cabin chronometrical instruments, charts, tins of compressed food, ammunition, specimen-boxes, etc.

"Good evening, Major Kennedy!" ex-

claimed a smart, keen-faced young airman, in undress flying gear, who came forward to greet them, tendering a brisk salute, which the other returned.

"Good evening, Martin! I've brought my two boys to look over the airship. This is Jake, and here is his brother, Dan."

"Delighted to meet you, I'm sure, young gentlemen. Ever been in an airship before?"

"No, sir," replied the boys, just a little bewildered by the new turn of events. It seemed to them that somehow this wonderful airship, one of the latest type of the famous N.S. Blimps, concerned them.

"Oh, never mind, you'll get your air-legs before you've been in her a couple of days. I reckon you'll enjoy the trip to Africa immensely," said the airman.

"A couple of days? Enjoy the trip to Africa?" mused Jake. But Dan had already tumbled to it. He dashed forward, gripped his father by the hand, and exclaimed:

"Father, how ripping! Why didn't you tell us?"

And the next moment both boys, with the wild exuberance of lads about to start on a great adventure, were dancing about the major with frenzied delight, to the amusement of the mechanics, and the bewilderment of the professor, who looked on with a comical grin.

"Where are we going to, Father?" asked Dan.

"Elephant hunting in Central Africa, of course," chimed in Jake, who had been silently making some rapid geographical calculations, puzzling out how far seven thousand miles would take them.

"Is it true?" asked the younger boy.

"Why, yes, of course, I expect we shall do a little hunting out there. We shall certainly have to land a few times for water and game."

"Then we'll bring ivory and gold dust back with us!"

"Perhaps," added the major.

"And we'll explore unknown country, sailing over lagoons and jungles, forests where the pygmies live, and watch the

buffalo herds, elands, giraffes, etc., on the open plains," observed Jake, giving rein to his imagination.

"And see the lions and panthers crouching in their lairs, ready to pounce on their prey," interposed Dan, not to be outdone.

"And alligators, rhinoceroses and such things on the banks of the rivers."

The major and his friends looked on and laughed at all this boyish glee. The secret was out now, and the bait had been swallowed whole by those eager, enthusiastic youths.

"Yes, you'll agree, Jake," he said, "I kept the secret very well. Captain Martin here and myself have discussed the question for months, looking at it in every possible light, examining the pros and cons, and we have agreed that it can be done with no more danger than sailing a small yacht round the British Isles, as we managed to do last year."

"It's scrumptious, Pater. It's the most stunning and original idea for a holiday that's ever been suggested," exclaimed Jake.

"So, when my old friend, Professor Gregory, agreed to come with me, and Captain Martin with his air-mechanic Macpherson there, who has flown over twenty thousand miles with him in Blimps and other non-rigid airships during the war, I decided to go ahead, for I knew it would delight you beyond measure."

"Whoop-la! I feel so excited, I could hug you, Pater," cried the younger boy. "Why, we shall be the first hunters to explore the jungles of Central Africa from the air."

"But you'll have to obey orders and work hard, youngsters!" said the major, with just a touch of authority forced into his tones.

"So we will. We'll do watch and duty turn about, stand guard, clean the engines, anything in fact that we're ordered to do," replied Dan.

"And mighty glad of the chance, sir!" added Jake, stepping back a pace, straightening himself, in the approved Air Force style, and tendering a smart salute to the

three chiefs of the expedition, who now stood facing the enthusiastic boys.

"Here are your two cabin-boys, Martin!" said the jovial major, turning to the aviator.

"Two hefty young specimens, anyhow," observed the captain. "They shall be put under discipline and training to-morrow, sir, and I guess they'll be pretty tough airmen before the voyage is over."

Jake and Dan had forgotten that they were hungry, had not tasted food in fact since morning, save for a few dry biscuits in the train. But that was nothing. They were now on the edge of the biggest adventure that ever came in the way of two boys fresh from school.

"Gee! what would Hunter and Grimshaw think if they knew of this?" muttered Jake, as, left to their own devices for a few minutes, while the others discussed a few final details, the setting of the wind, instruments, charts, supplies, etc., they climbed into the gondola and began to explore things for themselves.

The boys knew something about aircraft, engines, construction and mechanics, and not a single part of that wonderful ship escaped their attention.

"Twin-engined!" was Jake's first comment.

"Yes, both 275 horse-power 'Eagles,' too," replied Dan, after a quick glance at the port and starboard sides of the little engine-room.

"Christopher! I wonder what speed she can touch with those powerful things?" said Jake.

"Fifty miles easily on a dead level with no wind," replied a voice from somewhere below. And the next moment a man's head appeared above the edge of the fuselage of the gondola.

"Hello! who are you, please?" asked the elder lad.

"I'm Macpherson, ef ye please, young genelmen. The capt'n told me to show you over the ship."

"Oh, thank you, Macpherson . . ."

"Mac, ef ye please, just Mac'ull do if

ye dinna mind," replied the air-mechanic. "Ye're sailing with us, I understan', and maybe ye'd like to know a few things aboot the ship?"

"Oh, yes, Mac!" chorused the boys together.

"Then I'll tell ye exactly what I know, an' what Mac doesn't know aboot Zero No. 99 isna worth tellin'."

"She'll do fifty miles an hour, did you say, Mac?" asked Dan.

"Yes, an' mair ef she's pushed," replied the Scotchman. "But ye ken it's no worth while to strain her engines o'er muckle. And the capt'n isna the man to do it without a reason."

"I understand," said Jake. "But with a good wind behind her, she'd do a great deal more."

"That's just the point, sir. With a twenty-knot breeze behind her, she'd do seventy miles. An' once, when we were caught in a fefty-knot gale, we jest drifted home to port, without using a drap o' petrol or a single rev. o' the props. But

then, mind ye, the gale was behind us, an' when we reached the mooring ground we just couldna land, and were blown a hundred miles to leeward afore the wind blew out. But we got hame alreet the morn, an' not a wee bit the wur."

"She's got a wonderful stream-line!" said Dan, lifting his eyes to the huge silvery envelope which stretched overhead.

"Aye, the very best brains have conceived that shape, from the blunt nose to the tail-fin and rudders. 'Tis to minimize the air disturbance aloft, an' to ease off the pressure, when we get a strong side-wind. Ye'll mind, too, the shark-like nose o' the gondola. It's covered in forrard a'most like the bow of a destroyer."

"That's to lessen the resistance to the wind."

Mac nodded, glad to find his companions knew something about aeronautics. In fact, as the air-mechanic continued to explain things, he was more and more amazed how much the youngsters knew. He soon found out that both the boys were not only keen about engines and aircraft, but

had already received a very good training in mechanical engineering. What they needed now was a little practical experience.

"Ye'll both be engine-men in anither fortnight," he added. "An' in anither six weeks ye'll be expert aerial navigators."

"It will be your training, Mac, if we are," said Jake.

At that moment Major Kennedy called to the boys from below.

"Hello there! Aren't you hungry, you young cubs?" he shouted.

"Gee! but I'd forgotten about that, Pater," replied Jake, leaning over the side of the gondola.

"When did you have your last meal?"

"At breakfast before we left school this morning."

"Gracious, and you've had nothing since?"

"A couple of biscuits in the train, that's all," replied the boys, who suddenly began to discover very evident signs of hunger now that they had been reminded of the fact.

"Then come down, you rascals. We're

just going home. Dinner will be spoiling."

Bidding a hasty good-bye to Mac, who was to sleep aboard the airship, and promising to report for duty next morning, the two boys slid down one of the mooring ropes, for they were as agile as monkeys, then scrambled into the car. The professor and Captain Martin accompanied them to St. Mary's, where a fine spread awaited them.

Not until now did the two boys discover how really hungry they were.

"Make a good meal, youngsters!" urged their father. "It may be a long time before you have another chance like this."

But neither Jake nor Dan needed any encouragement in the matter. After a liberal helping of soup, they returned again and again to the attack on the savoury entrée, and the more substantial and succulent joint. But when the turn came for the pudding, they confessed themselves beaten. Even their voracious appetites were at length satisfied. Poor Martha, however, showed such evident disappointment at this, for she had prepared their favourite dish—

spiced raisin pudding with rich custard sauce—that, for her sake, they rallied each other to the attack.

"May be half-rations before long, Jake, you know!" said the pater facetiously. "Explorers don't have spiced duff and custard sauce, do they, Professor Gregory?"

"Not in Central Africa!" replied the great traveller, smiling at the boys. "A little dried elephant steak, or a monkey cutlet may come as a luxury sometimes."

"Ugh!" gasped Dan, whose stomach, now full to repletion, showed symptoms of distress at this suggestion.

"And no sauce?" added the Captain, entering into the conversation.

"No custard sauce. Only a little brackish water to wash down the meal, if you're lucky," declared the professor with a mischievous grin.

When this leg-pulling had ceased and they were sat about the fire, for the north-west wind had made the evening cool, the professor became very genial, and, urged on by the others, he recounted some of his most wonderful adventures in different

parts of the world. He riveted their interest by telling of hairbreadth escapes, sufferings from hunger and thirst, long weary marches through dark forests, fever-smitten jungles, adventures with lions, elephant herds, alligators, and that king of African rivers, the rhinoceros.

When the boys retired to bed, therefore, it may have been the effects of a too liberal meal after their long fast, or it may have resulted from these weird tales of the jungle, but their vivid dreams made these stories only too real.

While Jake dreamt that he sailed happily over forest, jungle and lagoon, poor Dan, more sensitive and acute, was lost in a maze of forest and jungle. Separated from their companions, he and Jake were parched with thirst in a land where no water could be found. Once, Jake rescued him from the fierce jaws of a terrible alligator on the banks of a slimy river, whose shore was covered by these loathsome creatures. Then, in a wild desert of unending jungle, where the lion and the panther roamed, they

were captured and imprisoned by the untamed tribes of an African forest.

But even as he passed through this terrible nightmare, a voice sounded in his ears. It was Jake calling him to awake, for the sun was already ten degress above the horizon.

"Wake up, Dan!" he cried.

"Ooah!" yawned Dan.

"Come along, or the airship will leave us behind," urged his brother, thinking this the best method to arouse the sleeper.

"The airship?" echoed Dan.

"Yes, stupid! Have you forgotten? If the wind suits, we're sailing this morning."

At one bound Dan was out of bed. His dream had vanished like the mist before the wind, for his mind was now full of the great adventure which was to begin that day.

An hour and a half later the whole party were assembled on the aerodrome at Cattewater, while the Zero strained at her moorings, under the strong north-west wind, as though eager to sail southward over the deep blue sea.

CHAPTER III

BY AIRSHIP TO AFRICA

AT ten o'clock that morning everything was ready. The engines had been tested, the petrol tanks refilled to their utmost capacity, the last tubes of helium had been taken aboard the Zero, passports which might prove necessary should they be compelled to land in some foreign country had been secured, and a final examination of the airship had been made by Captain Martin and his capable air-mechanic.

"What are we waiting for, Martin?" asked the professor, who was anxious to get away while this favourable wind lasted.

"A telegram from the Meteorological Office in London, sir."

"Oh, for the official weather forecast, you mean."

"Yes, Professor, and here it comes."

At that instant a telegraph boy rode up on a bicycle, and handed a tinted envelope to the captain. Martin tore it open and read out the message aloud:

"FLYING PROSPECTS FOR THE NEXT TWENTY-FOUR HOURS—

"Fresh north-westerly winds likely to continue for some twelve hours, West of England and the Continent, including the Channel. Favourable for flying all types of aircraft. But towards sunset the weather will deteriorate, wind will most likely veer into the south-west. Squalls and heavy rains will then ensue, and visibility will become poor, with weather conditions unsuitable for aviation.

"M. O. London."

"That settles it, Martin," said the major. "The sooner we get away, the better. If we wait until to-morrow we may be unable to leave for a week."

"Yes, sir. We'll get right away at once, and with this present wind we'll be

over the Mediterranean before that thick weather comes."

"All aboard!" came the order sharply, and three minutes later the six members of the expedition were within the gondola, the rope ladder was drawn up, while the ground assistants stood ready to loose the landing-ropes.

"All ready below?" shouted Captain Martin through the megaphone.

"Yes, sir," came the response.

"Let go!"

The cables were slipped from the mooring posts, and the Zero, glistening like a silver bird in the bright morning sunshine, rose into the blue vault of heaven, drifting seaward by the sheer force of the wind.

As soon as she had climbed to a thousand feet, the engines were gradually started by Mac, as the tinkle of a bell sounded in the little engine-room. Then, slowly turning, for she had been moored by the head, the course was shaped from the navigating bridge, and, with engines at half speed and with a fair wind on her starboard quarter, the

airship left the coast of Devon and swept southward at forty-five miles an hour.

Jake and Dan, clad in overalls, and warm flying-caps, delighted beyond measure at this new sensation, were watching the strange effect down below as the earth seemed to slip away from under their feet. But they were quickly roused from their dreams by the peremptory orders of the captain, who hailed them through the megaphone:

"Look alive there, boys! Stow away those mooring cables."

Those sharp staccato tones, directed at them so forcibly, brooked no delay. They remembered that they were under orders now. Their father might be in charge of the expedition, but Captain Martin was in command of the airship.

They hastened to obey, and coiled away the strong but thin stranded wire cables, hoping still to get a glimpse of the coast and the harbour before they were lost to view. But order followed order in rapid succession.

"Let out the aerial!" came next.

The youths ran forward, uncoiled the long aerial wire, for they had already received some salutary lessons before starting.

"He's going to use the wireless, Dan," said Jake, who, though panting with exertion, was eagerly watching for the captain to tap out his first message.

The Government Wireless operator down below near to the entrance to the harbour was already in action.

"What airship is that?" came the first sharp question.

"Zero No. 99," replied the captain, for he was using the new wireless telephone. "Is my instrument clear?"

"Yes, fairly good. Wants tuning up a trifle."

"There, is that better?"

"Yes. Where are you bound for?"

"Central Africa," replied the captain.

"What's that? Repeat the last message," asked the ground operator.

"Big-game hunting in Central Africa," repeated the air-skipper, enjoying the embarrassment of the man below.

"Gee! that's some joke, isn't it?"

"Not a bit of it. We're also a scientific expedition. Professor James Spencer Gregory, F.R.S., is aboard."

"Who is in command of the expedition?" asked the man below, now some three or four miles away to the northward.

"Major Wilson Kennedy, late His Majesty's Commissioner in Northern Nigeria," replied Captain Martin.

"Right-o. Pleasant trip to you all. Good-bye-ee!"

"Good-bye, Plymouth."

This was their last link with the old country, save that a few minutes later the Eddystone lighthouse, looming up on their starboard bow, some 14 miles S.S.W. of Plymouth breakwater, tendered them a salute from the balcony with a couple of hand-signalling flags.

"Don't stand staring there like mummies," yelled the skipper, turning once more upon the boys, who had been peering at him from a few feet away during the wireless conversation with Plymouth. "Can't

you see Eddystone is sending us greetings? Dip the pennant to show their message has been received."

The boys tumbled forward and dipped the pennant three times in rapid succession, wondering what on earth had come over the captain. Dan was already feeling air-sick, and, though Jake was quite unwilling to confess it, he also felt a little bit queer about the gills and in the region of the abdominal nerves.

Had they only known it, the captain's frequent orders, so peremptorily given, were not merely intended as a first lesson in that discipline which is so imperative for the safety and welfare of an expedition, but also to keep the lads' minds so thoroughly occupied with the importance of their duties, however small, that the first stages of air-sickness and nausea might more easily be overcome.

Air-sickness, after all, is very much like *mal-de-mer*. They are second cousins. And the advice of a famous physician still holds: "If you would avert it, keep the

mind occupied. If you can think of nothing else to do, work out the first five propositions in Euclid."

By the time they had finished their various duties, the boys were already feeling fit. The fine, bracing air at 2,000 feet, to which height they had risen, had reinvigorated them. They were in mid-Channel now, and the coast of England was a mere smudge on the northern horizon. Mac was busy in the engine-room, tending, nursing and coaxing the powerful machines as though they were infants. The professor and Major Kennedy were carefully re-arranging their belongings in the little covered-in cabin which had been assigned to them.

Jake and Dan had time to look around at last. It seemed to them that they were sailing in a wonderful vault of azure. Only the pulsating throb of the engines appeared to speak of life and motion. It seemed impossible to their inexperienced minds that they were racing through space at over fifty miles an hour. Save for an occasional sea-gull, which sailed alongside

or beneath them for a few moments, there was nothing which supplied the sense of motion.

"How many 'revs.' is she doing, Mac?" shouted the captain down the speaking-tube.

"Eleven hundred, sir," came the quick response.

"Slow her down a bit. We're doing nearly sixty knots. We might as well save petrol while this wind lasts."

"Aye, aye, sir!"

"Sixty miles an hour!" said Jake. "Phew! it seems impossible."

"Knots!" replied Dan, who was much more precise where figures were concerned.

"Which means?"

"About sixty-eight miles an hour," answered the younger boy after a rapid mental calculation.

Dan, with his quick mathematical mind, was trying to work out in crude figures how long it would take them to reach the north coast of Africa at the present rate of speed, assuming that the wind held and did not change its quarter and blow them out of

their course, a possibility which he could only faintly hope for. But at that very moment, the skipper, seeing them idle, roared at them again—

"Ahoy there, you boys. No idling aboard here!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" replied the lads, becoming suddenly alert, and running forward in response to the hail.

"Did you say you'd like to become airmen?"

"Wouldn't we just, sir," said Jake, noting that something approaching a smile played around the skipper's face.

"Then come here, and take your first lesson in aerial navigation. You can already steer a ship, I understand?"

The boys nodded.

"That's something, but an airship is vastly different from a steamer. However, as you're keen and intelligent, I will teach you how to navigate a dirigible, to fly in the clouds without losing direction when we run into thick weather, to calculate correctly the effects of wind pressure, to

work out compass bearings, resistance, and how to offset drift, do you understand?"

"Yes, sir!" cried the boys eagerly.

"Then take this wheel, Jake. Keep her so—S.S.E. two points south. Hold her, steady now."

So, while Jake took his first turn at the steering gear of an airship, the captain began to explain to the delighted youths some of the mysteries of aerial navigation, and to emphasize the difference between seamanship and airmanship. And he found his pupils apt and willing to learn.

"You'll soon pick up sufficient knowledge to be useful," he remarked at the end of a quarter of an hour. Then, handing them a pair of binoculars, he told them to keep a sharp look-out over the port bow for the first glimpse of land.

This they proceeded to do, scanning the distant horizon where sea and sky met, and taking an occasional peep at some passing ship down below, thrashing its way through the waters of the Channel, outward or homeward bound.

"Look at the colour of the sea, Jake," observed Dan, his attention distracted for a moment.

"Wonderful," returned his brother. "I never imagined it could assume such a lovely blue."

"Why, I do believe there's another airship sailing below us."

"Where?" exclaimed Jake.

"On the starboard quarter."

"Nonsense! it's a reflection of our own ship. Its streamlines are identical with those of the Zero," said the elder boy, after watching the image for a moment. "The sea is just like a mirror."

A school of porpoises, gambolling on the surface of the water, next attracted the attention of the younger boy, but Jake, who was just then keenly watching out for the first signs of land, suddenly gave a joyful shout—

"Land ho!" he yelled excitedly.

"Where away?" asked the skipper.

"On the port bow, sir; Islands, I think."

"You're asleep, boys. I saw them five

minutes ago, and wondered when you'd wake up. They're the Channel Islands. Keep your eyes skinned for the French coast!"

Having been caught napping once, the boys determined to recover their reputation for alertness, for they were beginning to have considerable respect for the opinions of this daring air-skipper. They were anxious to stand well in his estimation. Moreover, he seemed rather more austere than he had at first appeared, and they feared him, just a trifle, especially as they had been handed over to him for discipline and training.

The drift on the airship had been somewhat pronounced on the journey across the Channel, so, having made out his true bearings by a glimpse of the Islands, Captain Martin adjusted the course, bringing the ship's head almost due south. This occasioned further pressure from the wind, which still held almost due N.W., and consequently the altered course meant more drift.

"Open out that port engine, Mac," ordered the captain. This order was promptly obeyed, and shortly afterwards

Dan caught sight of low-lying land right ahead, and announced the discovery.

"That's better, youngster!" observed the keen-faced airman. "It's the Pt. de Talbert, and the Normandy coast. They'll challenge us by wireless directly, though they've been informed by cable and will be expecting us. I hope they won't insist on our landing, but the Customs people are apt to be awkward sometimes."

They soon crossed the coastline now, and, much to the relief of all parties, after a few short wireless stabs in the ether, with laconic messages on either side, they were allowed to proceed.

Then, for the next four hours, they sailed almost due south over the eastern provinces of France. Stretching towards Bordeaux, across the wide estuary of the Gironde, they caught occasional glimpses of the Bay of Biscay. At five o'clock they passed over the ancient town, for the wind had held splendidly, and their start from England had been timed most opportunely. They could not expect a continuance of such good

fortune, however, and every few minutes Captain Martin glanced uneasily out towards the treacherous bay, then southward towards the looming Pyrenees, as though he would solve the riddle of the weather conditions for the next twelve hours.

His feelings were shared by the rest of the party, for, with the exception of Jake, who was assisting Mac with the engines, all the rest were clustered about the navigating bridge, where they had been lunching on sandwiches, cold meat, and hot coffee from the thermos flasks newly filled before leaving. Major Kennedy and Dan had occasionally relieved the air-skipper at the wheel.

"We've done splendidly, Martin," the major was observing. "Plymouth to Bordeaux in seven hours without even pushing the engines."

"I know," replied the skipper. "It's almost a record. But we've had a wonderful gale behind us, with very little drift so far. But the wind is veering a trifle and it's getting thicker towards the sou'west."

"We're out of the radius of the British

Meteorological Office now," interposed the professor. "What we want is a new weather forecast for the next twenty-four hours. Why not speak to Bordeaux or Barcelona about it? Try the observatory at the latter place. If the chief, Professor Zamora, should be there now, he will help us all he can; he is an old friend of mine."

"Capital idea!" replied Martin. "We're almost within speaking distance."

Huge banks of clouds were now rolling up over the black line of the Pyrenees and some action was necessary unless they were prepared to land for the night. This they were very undesirous of doing. It had been their intention, if weather conditions continued at all favourable, to reach Algiers on the North African coast before touching ground.

"It is less than eleven hundred miles, even allowing for a little drift," the captain had declared.

"Which means a continuous flight of some twenty-seven hours," added the major, "assuming an average of forty miles."

"Exactly, and our average up to Bordeaux

was sixty or over," said the skipper. "And as the engines are doing splendidly, and the Zero has a fifty hours' flight already to her credit, we ought to reach Algiers unless we run into contrary winds."

"Then let us try to pick up Barcelona," concluded the professor.

The aerial therefore was quickly uncoiled again by Dan, and this time the Morse Code was used on the wireless telegraph, the distance being as yet too great for the telephone. Much to his delight, Dan was allowed to assist, and "listened in" for replies after the skipper had sent the following message, for the boy had become expert with the "Buzzar" during the last two years.

"METEOROLOGICAL—BARCELONA . . . BRITISH AIRSHIP ZERO—99 BRITISH-AFRICAN EXPEDITION WITH PROFESSOR JAMES SPENCER GREGORY ABOARD ASKS FLYING CONDITIONS MEDITERRANEAN AND NORTH AFRICAN COAST. PRESENT POSITION—44 DEG. 25 MIN. N.—1 DEG. 20 MIN. W. FLYING SOUTH."

"Any reply from Barcelona yet?" asked the major, who steered while both the captain and Dan "listened in" with the receiving caps fitted over their ears.

"Nothing yet from Barcelona, Pater," replied the boy. "But the air is full of messages from other sources. Some one is speaking in a hurry to London about a criminal who has escaped by air."

"That's the Eiffel Tower speaking to Scotland Yard. You can shut that out, sonny. Ah, here it comes. Are you ready to jot it down?"

"Aye, aye, sir!" said the boy, already beginning to scratch the writing pad with his pencil.

"Good! Have you got it correctly?" asked the professor, and the young operator, beaming with pride, tore off the slip and handed it to the speaker. The message ran as follows—

"BRITISH AIRSHIP, ZERO—99: GREETINGS FROM ZAMORA. WEATHER CONDITIONS BECOMING BAD WITH S.W. WINDS AND THICK WEATHER WESTERN EUROPE W. OF 5 DEG. EAST. ADVISE YOU RUN S.E. BY E. TILL N. OF MINORCA. EDGE OF N.E. TRADE WIND THERE WILL AID YOU. SALUTATIONS. BARCELONA."

"Capital! Excellent! Good fellow, Zamora," exclaimed the professor. "It will

lengthen our voyage a couple of hundred miles or more, but we shan't be wasting petrol and oil fighting adverse winds."

The airship was put about on her new course, and, skirting the very edge of the lofty Pyrenees, as night fell, they were soon over the Mediterranean. The wind was coming in squalls now, and the vessel began to pitch and roll, but, by timely advice, they had averted a disaster. Further west, vivid flashes of lightning could be seen. But eastward, the stars were shining brightly. They were on the very edge of a terrible storm, and, had they delayed their departure from England for another twelve hours, it was doubtful whether the expedition would not have had to be abandoned, for the weather had broken for a long spell.

There was little rest for anyone that night, however. The wind howled and raged, and the usually quiet surface of the Middle Sea was whipped into monstrous waves. But Captain Martin forged ahead, and the engines responded to the call.

He made what "southing" he could and, when day broke, the weather conditions eased. They were almost half-way across the Mediterranean on their triangular course, with the Balearic Isles on their left, rising like rich gems out of the azure sea.

They had found the much desired N.E. trade wind, however, and, although they were only on the edge of it, they were carried along swiftly on their course, with both engines making over 1,100 revolutions a minute.

"290 miles to Algiers!" announced the captain, after a brief examination of his charts, "and the worst of the blow is over."

"Then we shall touch the African coast this afternoon," replied the major.

And, true to his words, soon after two o'clock by British time, the palm-fringed coast of the great southern continent came into view. Forty-five minutes later, with silent engines, they sailed over the picturesque town and harbour of Algiers. Then in answer to signals from the French fort at Kasbah, they circled round and landed on African soil.

CHAPTER IV

ACROSS THE SAHARA

TWO days were spent in the delightful town of Algiers, where the major and Professor Gregory were the guests of the French Commandant. Considerable interest was shown in the objects of the expedition, which was declared to be the first of its kind, and the success of the adventure duly toasted by the official guests, at a banquet in honour of the eminent naturalist, who was an honorary member of several learned French societies.

The captain and his three assistants, meanwhile, thoroughly overhauled and inspected the airship for her impending voyage across the vast stretch of the Sahara. Stores of petrol and oil, cases of dates, figs and olives were taken on board, and, on the morning of the third day, the Zero left the French aviation ground amid a salute of

guns from the fort and the cheers of the assembled crowd. The Arab population in particular had been immensely excited by the appearance of the airship, and when they watched it soar upwards and then sail away southwards towards the great desert, they said :

" It is the will of Allah. The great white ship has sailed across the desert. But it will never return. The bones of the infidels will bleach on the sands."

But despite this unpleasant augury by the Children of the Prophet as to the ultimate fate of the white adventurers, the explorers pushed southward over the billowy waste of yellow sand.

Sometimes they were baffled by contrary winds. But often, by casting out ballast or inflating the huge envelope still further by more helium from the high-pressure steel tubes, they rose and found a more favourable current in the upper air.

Far down below, they saw the caravans following the desert routes along the chains of oases, as they have done for centuries

and centuries. Or they watched the wonderful effects of the fierce sirocco, the monsoon of the desert, blotting out the landscape and obliterating everything in a whirling cloud of fine red dust and particles of sand. At such times they were thankful to be sailing in the upper skies, happy and serene, away from the parching heat and the blinding dust.

But they found that the Sahara is not all desert, as the old travellers declared. There are broken mountains, rising into plateaux, with glistening streams rushing down the ravines. In these districts, the fig tree and the olive flourish, while about the oases, the negroes and their Berber taskmasters make some pretence of cultivation. But the streams and rivers fade away in the vast desert, and the wilderness seems to dominate everything.

So for nearly twelve hundred miles across the greatest desert in the world the aerial hunters sailed until, after a continuous voyage of some thirty-three hours, they sighted the lordly Niger, and entered a

new world of forest, jungle and open plain, where the tropical vegetation brought to the eyes a wondrous relief, after the glare of the burning sands.

For another hundred miles they drifted lazily southward and eastward, reached the hinterland of Northern Nigeria, and, as evening approached, they searched the boundless forest for a suitable place where the Zero might be safely moored.

To land an airship without assistance from the ground, however, is not an easy proceeding. Every preparation had been made, nevertheless, for such a necessity. Strong grapnels, with four or five sharp flukes, had been fitted to each of the three cables, and, as they sailed along fifty feet above the tree-tops, the skipper ordered:

"Stand ready with the grapnels!"

Jake and Dan stood forward, one on the starboard and the other on the port side, ready to let go, at the first word of command. Mac had already slowed down the engines so that the propellers were just "ticking over," while three pairs of

sharp eyes peered ahead for some likely spot.

Swarms of gaily coloured birds—cockatoos, blue and yellow macaws, ring-tailed parakeets, etc.—rose from the trees and flew away screaming in terror, frightened by the appearance of the great white phantom which now floated slowly along, for the wind had almost dropped. Hundreds of monkeys of all sizes and hues leapt amongst the branches, screeching and chattering as the airship approached. Then they watched furtively from their hiding places at a safer distance.

"Wild turkeys!" announced the professor, pointing to the westward, where a flight of larger birds attracted his attention.

"River and clearing ahead," shouted the captain from the bridge, a moment later, for his keen eyes had noted a bank of low-lying mist, denoting the presence of water.

Suddenly the dense forest ended abruptly, and the blue waters of a wide lagoon, which irrigated a verdant plain almost circular in appearance, and about a quarter of a

mile in diameter, caused a joyous exclamation to rise from nearly every member of the crew. A giant palm of the coconut species, on the edge of the stream, and almost in the centre of the clearing, caused the major to ejaculate:

"The very spot for a hunting camp."

"Full speed ahead with the starboard engine!" ordered the captain. Then, as the rudder was jammed over, and nearly a full circuit of the clearing was made—

"Ease her! Stop her!" followed, and, when almost over the palm—

"Let go the grapnels!"

Flung thwart-wise, both anchors caught, one in the upper branches, while the other gripped the bark and stem. Two more circuits were made, the cable being paid out to a sufficient length. Then, as the air valve was blown off a little, the Zero, having lost some of her buoyancy, came safely to earth with the gondola just clearing the ground, and the great envelope some thirty feet above the earth.

A third cable was then secured round

the bole of the tree, and the adventurers began to make their camp.

"Flash—bang!"

It was the major's gun which spoke, and a fine fat turkey which had just risen in alarm from the edge of the lagoon, gave promise of a royal supper.

A fire was kindled, and a sumptuous meal of roast turkey, bread, tinned pine-apples, and coffee was quickly prepared, for the sun was already sinking amongst the pines, and the short twilight of the tropics heralded the swift coming of the night.

"Look, Jake," cried Dan, pointing up at the giant palm a few yards away. "Real coco-nuts ready for the picking."

"Gee! I'm for the attempt, though it looks some climb to get at them," answered his brother.

"So am I. This heat on the ground is terrific. I feel frizzled up, and my throat is parched."

"Then we'll drink coco-nut milk for supper. The professor says we mustn't

touch the water in the lagoon unless it's boiled first, or we shall be down with black-water fever."

"Ugh! I didn't know that. I've had a good drink already," cried Dan. "Here goes for the nuts!"

Both boys rushed to the tree, but Jake reaching it first, made several attempts to climb it without much success.

"You must walk up it as the niggers do," shouted his father, who, sitting smoking by the fire with the professor, seemed highly amused at his son's attempt.

Jake was not easily discouraged, however, and at his next attempt, half native fashion, half European, he completed the toilsome climb, threw down several of the largest nuts, then descended, considerably fatigued with his exertion, and perspiring visibly with the oppressive heat.

The nuts were quickly distributed, the outer fibre cut away, and a hole was pierced in each shell with a pen-knife. Then the delicious milky juice was allowed to trickle down their throats.

"Scrumptious!" was Dan's first remark, smacking his lips and regaining his breath, for he had taken a long drink.

"It's quite cold too," observed Jake.

"And worth a king's ransom in this frightful oven of a climate."

"Easily!" replied the elder boy, applying the nut to his lips again. And every one who has tasted the real thing, under similar conditions, will agree.

Night closed in upon them now. Night in the tropics on the edge of a vast jungle, unexplored as yet, brought a sense of danger which they had not experienced during their long and adventurous journey. The languid evening air seemed heavy with rich perfume wafted from the luxuriant growth around them. But strange sounds from the depths of the forest, weird calls, savage snarls, fierce howls, and the rumbling roar of a distant lion spoke of hidden perils, while swarms of noxious insects from the margin of the stream made sleep well-nigh impossible.

While the two boys lay by the fire watching

the cheerful blaze, they could hear the professor talking in uneasy tones to their father. The captain and Mac were both on duty about the airship.

"The professor seems uneasy," whispered Jake. "What can be the matter, I wonder?"

"I expect those noisy brutes in the forest are worrying him," replied Dan drowsily, unconscious of the real danger which even at this moment was closing in upon the party. "I wish these confounded mosquitoes would let me alone. I swear I'm bitten from head to foot with the brutes, though I'm so close to the fire that I can scarcely breathe."

"Good heavens, what's that?" gasped the elder boy the next instant, as a terrific roar came from the edge of the clearing, scarcely one hundred yards from where they were camping.

"Christopher, it must be a man-eating lion," exclaimed Dan, springing to his feet in alarm.

The next instant, the flashlight from the gondola was suddenly switched on, and trained on the spot from whence the

awful noise came. Then the click of a camera was heard from the airship, and Captain Martin's cheerful voice called—

"Snapped them, Major! It will make a fine picture for the illustrated papers when we return. Did you see them?"

"Yes, they looked very pretty. Three man-eaters and half a dozen jackals, I believe."

The boys had seen the wild creatures also, and though not a little frightened by this sudden and unlooked for appearance of such ferocious neighbours, were immensely relieved to see how the beasts had slunk back into the forest when the light was flashed upon them.

But the danger which threatened the expedition did not come from the wild beasts, for the searchlight, which could be suddenly trained upon any part of the glade, was an effective safeguard, so long as the storage batteries contained sufficient voltage.

The real danger came from another quarter, and only the professor was sufficiently alive to the approaching peril at that moment and his advice was being ignored.

CHAPTER V

A TERRIBLE NIGHT

THE boys tried to sleep again, but the entrancing beauty of the tropical night enchanted them, and their nerves, moreover, had been badly shaken by the deafening roar of the lion.

"They won't come back," said Jake. "That flash from the searchlight terrified them."

"But what an infernal row the brutes are making now in the forest. There must be thousands of wild beasts all around us. Did you ever hear anything like it?" returned the younger boy.

"I'm going to sleep in spite of them. It will be my turn to relieve Mac in another three hours," declared his companion.

"Phew! it's too sultry. I'm going to keep awake and watch the stars. They're just beautiful. I never saw them so bril-

liant before, and there isn't a cloud in the sky."

So while Jake tried to sleep, Dan sat gazing into the heavens, then watched the reflection of those brilliant orbs in the waters of the still lagoon a few yards away, and listened to the conversation of the professor and his father, the former being evidently obsessed with some doubt as to a coming change in the weather. Once Dan distinctly heard him hail the captain and ask—

"How is the barometer now, Captain Martin?"

"Still falling a little," he heard the skipper say, and further words to the effect that it would be impossible to get away, and clear the trees before daylight.

This seemed to be the whole point of variance between them. The professor, somehow, seemed to think that they ought not to delay their start, lest it should begin to blow, and the captain insisting that, much as he wished it, he dared not make the attempt until daybreak.

Then Dan must have dozed for awhile. He certainly remembered no more. Even the noises in the forest had died down, and it seemed to him that the stars shone less brightly. But he was too drowsy to take further notice until he was suddenly rudely awakened from a pleasant dream by Jake shouting in his ears:

"Wake up, Dan! Lend a hand with the cables smartly!"

"W-what's the matter?" he asked, leaping to his feet. "W-where are you, Jake?"

The fire had gone out and a thick pall of darkness hung like a curtain over the clearing and the lagoon. It was like an impenetrable barrier. Dan noted that the stars were all blotted out, and, though he could hear voices and stentorian orders ringing across the glade, he could see nothing, until the searchlight flashed a sickly glare towards the giant palm, where the cables were made fast.

"Quick there, or it will be too late!" shouted the captain. "The barometer has

gone down like lead. The storm will be upon us in two minutes."

Mac had started the engines to ease the cables, while the professor and the two boys were tugging away trying to release the first and second grapnels—the third was to be slipped. The captain was on the bridge, shouting orders through the megaphone to Mac, the ground party, and the major, who was busy at the helium tubes, but desperately uneasy about the safety of his boys.

"Hurry there, we may just do it," shouted the captain.

The party needed no urging. They were working like Trojans. The first cable was in, and the second already loose, when suddenly, without an instant's warning, the tempest broke.

Cras-s-sh! came the first terrific peal of thunder, and the sickly gleam of the search-light turned pale and yellow in the vivid flash of fire which lit up both heaven and earth. And with the thunder and lightning came the storm-fiend.

"Leave it! Get aboard, all of you!" yelled the captain. But it was too late. Even as the three adventurers still on *terra firma* rushed for the gondola, the giant palm tree bent beneath the force of the gale, the cable snapped like a single wire, and the airship, regaining her freedom, was swept away in the lee of the storm. By a miracle she cleared the edge of the forest without becoming a total wreck, but her rudder was damaged and her starboard propeller smashed to atoms against another giant palm.

In an instant she was lost to view, and her port engine being powerless in the teeth of such a storm, she was swept away from the clearing at the rate of ninety miles an hour.

"She has gone!" cried Jake in a terror of dismay.

"My poor father!" sobbed Dan. "What will become of him?"

"Let her go, boys," said the professor. "She'll drift away a couple of hundred miles, and, if she is not seriously damaged,

she will get back here in a few days at most."

"A few days," wailed the younger boy, who was terribly distressed at being thus parted from his father.

"Yes, but come now, there is no time to waste. Let's save what we can before the camp is flooded, or we may be in a tight corner before they return."

The boys needed no second bidding. The professor's knowledge of life and conditions in tropical jungles, and the few stores and arms which had been landed, were the only guarantees left them for their future existence and security. The terrific downpour of rain which their guide had foreseen was already beginning. Rushing back towards the site of the camp, and aided by the continuous flashes of lightning, they hastily secured what stores they could.

Three rifles had been landed, including a "·450 Express" and a light "·303." They had each a Webley with a pouch of small ammunition, and the professor had been cute enough to secure his double-barrelled sport-

ing-gun. This was the piece with which he had shot the turkey. Three waterproof sheets, blankets, a compass, hunting-knives, some ammunition, and a few tins of provisions, besides the usual camp utensils, were now their sole possessions.

These things they piled quickly together, on the highest patch of ground, under the shelter of one of the ground sheets, while with the other two, and a few branches gathered for the fire, the professor, with the skill of a North American trapper, hastily constructed a rude tent beside the pile.

"There, that will do," announced the naturalist. "Get inside and hold the supports firm, while I hang on to the cover sheets."

They obeyed their leader quickly, glad to find even a little shelter from the storm, which had now burst upon them with terrific fury. Huddled close together, they sat and waited, amazed at the appalling majesty of the tempest, and silently wondered how the others were faring in the ill-fated Zero.

"Have you ever been in such a storm before, Professor?" asked Dan, who was now shivering with cold and apprehension, for they were all drenched to the skin while trying to assemble their belongings.

"I have seen worse than this, my boy," said the old man soothingly, placing his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"And I remember similar storms when I was a boy in Nigeria," added Jake, who had resolved to make light of their misadventure.

"Not quite so bad as this, Jake," returned his younger brother. "It's a second Deluge. We shall be washed away, even if we're not struck by lightning. See how the lagoon's risen, and look at the waves."

The flashes which followed each other so quickly tore aside the curtain of darkness, and revealed, to their horror, what seemed to the imagination of the boys to be a new peril. Cowering there, under the frail shelter of a temporary structure, which was in imminent danger of being whisked away by the fury of the wind every minute,

they saw the waters swirling around them on every side, and rising rapidly towards the point which reduced the margin of safety to a matter of inches. And still the storm-fiend raged unabated.

"Hold on!" cried the professor, as one end of the shelter blew loose. "It will lessen soon. Then it will subside as quickly as it began."

The wind shrieked and howled, and the trees of the forest which did not bend before it, went down like nine-pins. Giant after giant toppled over, snapped off like matchwood or uprooted by the fury of the gale.

The usually still waters of the lagoon seethed and boiled like a cauldron, and huge waves, capped with froth and fume, swept in whirling spray across the clearing.

Dan, in the midst of all his terror, thought of his father and the two airmen, and silently prayed that they might be delivered, though his brave heart misgave him. He did not believe that any airship could outride such a storm.

For a full hour they lay huddled there —two hours, then the wise man, learned in the lore of the jungle, spoke again after a long silence, and in his voice there was hope and courage :

" Cheeri-o, boys," he said, " the worst is over. I can see the stars again, and look, there comes the dawn."

CHAPTER VI

THE UNSEEN PERIL

THE professor was right as usual. The tempest passed as swiftly as it had come. The dawn came with tropical suddenness. Within an hour the sun was shining brightly, the songs of birds resounded from the tree-tops, and the now placid waters were subsiding rapidly. Nature smiled bounteously all around them in rich luxuriant waste, and the delicious freshness was exhilarating.

"Magical!" was Dan's only expression as he looked about him, for the bright sunlight had changed everything.

"Where has all the water gone?" asked Jake, as they quickly dried their clothes in the heat of the sun, and prepared the morning meal.

"The thirsty jungle has a thousand mouths," laughed the professor, who was

carefully examining the stores and equipment.

"The giant palm looks as stately as ever," declared Dan. "We'll try a few more of those delicious nuts to-day."

A keen look-out was then kept for the airship, for the boys were greatly concerned about the safety of the crew. But the professor was of the opinion that at least a couple of days must expire before the Zero could return.

"Can they find the spot again, sir?" asked the younger boy.

"Yes, the captain took his bearings just a little before we landed, and he also kept a chart of his course from the beginning of his voyage. All the same, if we can arrange some sort of a signal it will be a useful guide to them when they reach the neighbourhood of the camp. There are so many of these clearings, and one is very much like another."

"I have it," cried Dan enthusiastically.

"Well, what is it?" asked Jake.

"A smoke-signal! Let us keep a fire

of damp wood burning all day, in the middle of the clearing. It will make a tall column of black smoke which will be seen for miles."

"Splendid idea," agreed Jake.

The professor, however, was not quite so sure, but as he knew the anxiety of the boys on their father's behalf, he consented. Shortly afterwards, when they had breakfasted on the remains of the turkey, a few ship's biscuits, coffee, guavas, and a bunch of ripe dates which the naturalist had gathered, the latter strolled into the forest, saying he wished to make a few investigations.

While he was gone, the boys piled stacks of wet wood on to the fire, causing a column of black smoke to rise to a considerable height.

"There's a signal for you, Dan," said the elder boy, as he gazed triumphantly at the thin black streak which, in the absence of any current of wind, showed almost a perpendicular line.

"The professor didn't seem very keen

about it, did he, Jake?" said his brother, as he paused from his efforts to watch a flight of bright red flamingoes, which had been feeding on the other margin of the lagoon, but had now been scared by the crackling flames and the column of smoke.

"No, he seems a bit grumpy and out of sorts."

"Perhaps he's cross with the captain for not acting on his advice last night."

"Or does he think that the expedition has been spoiled, the elephant hunting lost, and his chance of picking up rare orchids and fossils destroyed?" asked Jake.

"It may be so. You see, all his precious specimen-boxes, and nearly all his other belongings, are in the airship, and if anything happens——"

"What can happen?" asked his companion in alarm. "The airship is sure to return. It cleared the trees all right, and Captain Martin has navigated her in many a storm before. He has even sailed her once, at least, through a German barrage."

"Hist!" whispered Dan. "Here comes the professor."

At that moment, the naturalist emerged from the forest, his face five shades paler than when he entered it.

"What is the matter, Professor?" asked Dan in some alarm.

The older man shrugged his shoulders, but did not instantly reply. During the time he had been absent he had been reading the riddle of that dark forest. There were features about this place he did not like, not that he was afraid, for no braver man lived than Professor Gregory. His keen senses had scented a new peril of which the boys knew nothing. If he had been alone, it would not even have disturbed him in the least. But these two boys had been left in his charge.

They had been left there by accident, it was true. But he had accepted the responsibility for their safety, and the suspicions which he had entertained in his own mind, the very moment they landed, were now more than confirmed.

What was he to do? Should he tell these boys of the new peril which threatened them? He felt that he must, for it was imperative that they should all be prepared.

As he re-entered the clearing, the professor's first glance was at the column of black smoke.

"Nothing wrong I hope, sir," said Dan, following up his first question.

"Yes, we are taking a great risk," replied the traveller, indicating by a nod of his head the towering column of smoke. "We must put out the fire or use only dry wood which will make little smoke."

"Why?" asked both the lads in alarm.

"There are too many eyes in that forest," was the brief but significant answer.

"Eyes in the forest?" echoed the boys, stooping to pick up their loaded rifles as the professor spoke, for there was that in his tones, rather than in his words, which struck terror at their young hearts.

"You mean of course those wild beasts which were stalking us last night before

the storm, and which were scared by the searchlight?" said Jake.

Their guide gave vent to a peculiarly hollow laugh, then remarked:

"Wild beasts? Poof, what are a few lions, pumas, and jackals to men armed with European rifles?"

"Yet the brutes scared me quite a lot," said Dan. "I confess that I was terrified when that brute of a man-eater began to roar within a couple of hundred yards of us."

"If there were nothing worse than lions, elephants, and hyenas, I shouldn't mind. The lagoon there, a little farther down, is swarming with crocodiles, hippopotami, and other monsters. They're worse than the other things you mention. But that isn't the worst! We're in the land of the Baduri," said the professor gravely.

"The Baduri?"

"Yes, the most terrible of all the Central African tribes, because the fiercest, the bravest, and the most cunning," said the naturalist, lowering his voice to a whisper.

"But we haven't seen a single native since we landed," exclaimed Jake, looking uneasily around him, and surveying in one rapid sweep the edge of the dark mysterious forest which engulfed them on all sides.

"That's just it. It was that very thing which first roused my suspicion. I begged the captain not to land here, but to cruise southward and eastward, as we were doing, until morning. That was not entirely because the barometer was threatening a storm. I had other reasons, but my judgment was overruled. I am now convinced that I was right."

"Gemini!" gurgled Jake.

"The reason why no natives have been seen," continued the traveller, keeping his eyes alert in the direction of that mysterious and dreadful forest, "is because no native belonging to another tribe *can* live in the sacred land of the Baduri."

"Why not?" asked Dan wonderingly, his fingers nervously clutching his rifle.

"Because they are taken, flayed alive, then roasted and eaten."

"Ugh! Then the brutes are cannibals," said Dan with a shudder.

"Every mother's son of them. They are ten times worse than the untamed Papuans."

"Strange I have never heard of them, or if I have, I have forgotten," said Jake.

"It isn't strange at all," replied the professor. "Very little is known of them. No travellers return from their land. Their country is impenetrable, surrounded by dense jungles and dismal fever swamps on every side. We sailed over those deadly swamps, and we are the first white men to do so. Whether we shall ever return is another story which cannot yet be told. But the Baduri, to make a long story short—and few men know more of them than I do—are the last remnant of a very ancient but depraved race.

"Generations ago," continued the naturalist, "they drove out the ape-men who preceded them. They are little dark wiry fellows, something akin to the forest pygmies. They use the deadly blow-tube and the poison arrow, which spells death at two hundred

yards or more. They dwell in the trees as much as on the ground, hence they cross the fever swamps without difficulty.

"They have a civilization of a primitive sort, and they are the custodians, by capture, of an ancient city whose wonderful temples are filled with rich treasures. These temples, and this city, were built by an earlier race."

"Not the mysterious city of Nophar?" broke in Dan.

"The same."

"I have heard my father speak of it many times, and of the men who tried to reach it," said the lad eagerly.

"Yes, many have tried, but no one ever returned."

"And you really think, Professor," interposed Jake, "that we are somewhere near to this wonderful city?"

"I am convinced of it. It cannot be more than fifty miles from here, and, had my advice been accepted, we might have safely investigated it from the air, and been the first white men to locate it and

place it on the map. But there, it's no use crying over spilt milk. The airship is lost for the present. We are stranded in the most dangerous spot of Central Africa, with a few days' provision at the most, with deadly fever swamps on every side, and we are surrounded by a peril which, hitherto, no white man has faced and lived."

The professor paused and looked at the tell-tale smoke signal, then shrugged his shoulders.

"We ought not to stay here another moment," he said hoarsely. "But, until the airship returns, there is no way of escape."

CHAPTER VII

THE SECRET OF THE JUNGLE

EVEN while the professor, in earnest and anxious tones, addressed his companions, a dozen curious eyes peered unseen from amid the foliage, at the little group of white men who had thus dared to intrude upon the sacred land of the Baduri.

The tell-tale column of smoke had already betrayed the presence of some possible enemy. Curious eyes had beheld it, and swift messengers, traversing hidden paths, or leaping from tree to tree like the ape-men, had carried the tidings to the high priests of Nophar.

Scouts had been thrown out toward the clearing. These were fierce dark wiry-looking men, agile as monkeys, small as pygmies; and each carried the deadly blow-tube with arrows which had been dipped in

poison. Their orders were to bring in the white men as prisoners if possible. If unable to encompass this, the strangers were to be slain. On no account were they to escape.

Faro, the high priest of Nophar, the cruellest and most blood-thirsty tyrant on African soil, had assembled the Baduri warriors by the altar of Shinko, the god with the jewelled head, and, after making an oration, declared:

"Mola Kwonga la!" which meant, "These white strangers must be slain; it is the will of Shinko with the green eyes."

A howl of rage went up from the Baduri, for they were angry to learn that their sacred land had been invaded. But the mystery of how the intruders had arrived puzzled them greatly. None of the outlying sentries who kept watch on the borders had seen them come.

Some said that they had dropped from the clouds, and Toucan, a dark fierce little fellow, wearing the golden ear-rings of a chieftain's son, and an ivory bar through his nostrils, declared:

"They were brought hither by the white albatross, a great phantom bird which sailed in the clouds."

But no one believed Toucan, who, for his temerity, had been flogged with thongs made of elephant hide, and imprisoned in a dismal chamber, one of the lower vaults of the sacred temple. At the feast of the new moon he was to be tried, and if condemned, as seemed most likely, he was to suffer the death penalty. This, in the case of a member of the Baduri, meant being tied to a tree in the forest and left for the wild beasts to devour him.

The real crime against Toucan, however, was conspiring against Faro, the high priest. For, strange as it may seem, amongst the mysterious beliefs of this ancient tribe, there is a legend which states:

"When the great white bird, the brother of Shinko, shall sail across the desert and reach the land of the Baduri, then shall the tribe meet with disaster, and the reign of Shinko and his priests shall end."

To mention the coming of the great white bird, therefore, was a crime punishable with death.

There were no kings amongst the Baduri, but the priesthood were a separate and distinct race, who held the fierce forest tribe in subjection by the terror of their religious rites and ceremonies, and by their cruelty and craft.

Tradition says that these priests are the descendants of a lost branch of the ancient Atlantean race, who escaped to the mainland of Africa when their island of Atlantis was destroyed. Travelling eastward and southward, the Atlanteans reached the land of the Baduri, where, thousands of years ago, they built the city of Nophar. Here they erected the sacred groves and the temple, enriched with costly treasures bartered or stolen from the surrounding tribes, and here the last remnant of the children of the Lost Atlantis still practised the rites and ceremonies of a forgotten religion.

There may or may not be some measure

of truth in this strange tradition. But this jealously guarded priesthood, their hidden mysteries and cruel rites, including human sacrifices to the green-eyed Shinko, and this secret city behind these impenetrable barriers of forest, swamp and jungle, all point to some strange and otherwise inexplicable origin.

The news of the coming of the white men, and the mention of the phantom bird, therefore, had aroused to the highest pitch both the curiosity and anger of the priests. And they, in their turn, chiefly through the words of Faro, had incited the Baduri.

All the hunters had been called in to listen, and the warriors had been assembled by the porphyry altar, on which stood the golden image with the cruel, glittering eyes.

"Death—death to the strangers!" Faro had declared, his tall commanding figure standing out in contrast to the pygmy ranks of the Baduri.

"Go—search the dark forest for them!

Bring them hither, alive if possible, for the feast of the full moon. They are the enemies of Shinko, the god of the Baduri," and with loud cries of—

"Mola Kwonga, la!" the great assembly had dispersed.

Incited by a wild religious belief, the pygmy warriors, without further delay, vanished into the forest. In an incredibly short space of time they crossed the miles of swamp and jungle towards the spot where the white strangers had been reported.

And all this while the airship, damaged by the gale, and blown hundreds of miles to the eastward, lay disabled beside another river, in a more open stretch of country. But her harassed crew, knowing the peril to which their comrades were being subjected, worked day and night, with hand and brain, trying to repair the fabric and the engines, hoping against hope that they might even yet arrive in time to save their companions.

CHAPTER VIII

TRAPPED BY THE PYGMIES

DAN and Jake, alarmed by the professor's words, had begun to kick out the embers of the fire, scattering the blazing faggots on every side, when suddenly from the depths of the forest on their right there came a most appalling cry.

"Christopher! what was that?" gasped the younger boy, instinctively raising his rifle to the ready, and pointing it with trembling hand towards the spot whence came the sound.

"Unearthly!" quavered Jake. "I never heard anything like it before."

The professor also stood alert, his head thrust eagerly forward, and his whole attitude one of quivering attention.

"It—it must be a jaguar!" declared Jake after a moment's pause, trying by

a supreme effort, to dissuade his companions from the thought which he knew to be uppermost in their minds.

Both lads looked at their guide. But he did not speak. He had not even moved from the attitude he had assumed. With his keen eyes glued to some spot on that dark line of forest, he waited and watched, as if he were a statue.

Suddenly he caught a movement, and raising his piece with the rapidity and precision of a backwoodsman, he fired.

The report of the rifle awoke the slumbering echoes of the forest. A chattering of monkeys, parakeets, and other birds, the snarl of a wild beast, and the grunt of a wart hog, smote the air. And then, above the rest, was heard the piercing cry which had startled them before.

"A leopard!" cried Dan, as a snarling beast leapt from a tree and fled across the farther end of the clearing, as if anxious to avoid some approaching peril.

"You've hit it, Professor," said Jake. "I'll go to make sure."

"Stay where you are!" ordered the guide.

"Why?" asked the boy innocently.

"It is death to go into the forest now."

"They're only wild beasts and you've frightened the whole crowd of them."

"Wild beasts?" echoed the professor, his face set and stern as if to meet some new danger.

"Yes, look, there's another couple of them," and as Jake pointed, two panthers, growling angrily, slid across the open space in the wake of the leopard.

"They're being driven out from behind," said the naturalist. "Don't you see what's happening?"

"I don't understand," said Jake.

"You remember that unearthly cry a few minutes ago?" said the professor gravely.

"Yes."

"That was a human voice."

"You mean that there are human beings in there, amongst those wild beasts," said the boy, pointing once more with his

left hand, while his right held the rifle poised.

"Yes, I did not fire at a beast. There was no immediate need to. I fired at a Baduri warrior peeping at us from the branch of a tree."

"Snakes alive!" gasped Dan. "Then we are surrounded by the c-cannibals?"

"I fear it is only too true. They have seen the smoke from the fire, and are gathering for the fray. We shall soon be hard put to it. Better rig up a little shelter with these camp effects. We shall need cover soon for still another reason. I know something of the ways of this terrible tribe."

"What will they do?" asked Dan.

"Why, they are going to drive the wild beasts from their cover across this clearing. They know now that we have fire-arms, but they will leave nothing undone to drive us into the forest, or within reach of their cursed arrows."

The boys placed their loaded rifles on the ground, in such a position that they

could snatch them up at the first warning. Then they set to work, building a little abattis of the few boxes and effects which had been landed from the Zero. After that, they lay down behind the improvised defences and waited. They did not long remain in peace.

Snarls and growls from the forest, and the trampling of undergrowth, soon proved that the professor, with his wonderful knowledge of the African tribes, had gauged the situation only too correctly. The chattering of the monkeys in the tree-tops, the screams of parakeets, and other weird cries, showed that some disturbing factor was rousing the denisons of the jungle.

"Keep cool, boys! There's sure to be a stampede directly. But we may be able to head them off."

The next moment, half a dozen wild creatures, including a couple of jackals, broke cover, and sniffed the air suspiciously, but, seeing the barricade, and scenting a new enemy, they slunk away

across the northern end of the clearing, and entered the forest on the other side.

"Look out! Here comes a man-eating lion!" shouted Jake, as a fierce animal, with huge jaws and tawny mane, leapt with tremendous bounds towards the little group.

The beast seemed furious and angry. With a terrible snarl he halted suddenly within twenty feet of the barricade. Then, crouching for a spring, he leapt towards Jake.

Bang-bang-bang!

Three rifles spoke out almost simultaneously, even as the infuriated animal hung in mid-air, and three bullets buried themselves in the man-eater.

"Well aimed, boys," cried the professor encouragingly as the beast fell in a struggling, writhing heap almost at their feet, gave a frightful howl, then rolled over and lay still.

There was no time to spare, however, to congratulate themselves upon this escape, for this was but the beginning of a terrible nightmare.

Driven from their lairs, the angry beasts leapt or slunk across the clearing, sometimes falling foul of each other, and fighting fiercely. At first there were but a score or more in the clearing at once. Then, as the cries and shouts of the hunters and beaters came nearer, crowds of fierce snarling creatures, lions, leopards, hyenas, jackals, and panthers, could be seen at once.

A rapid fire kept up from the barricade effectually headed off the beasts, however, and it seemed likely that even this manœuvre of the Baduri would fail, when suddenly, added to the sounds which filled the air, there came another bellowing howl, repeated from half a dozen throats.

"Heavens!" gasped the professor. "They've rounded up a herd of wild elephants, and are driving them towards us."

"Elephants!" echoed Dan.

"Yes, I can distinctly hear the trumpeting of the infuriated beasts."

"The trees," cried Jake excitedly. "Let's seek safety in the trees."

"No, no! It would be courting death. That may come later. For the present, we must face the herd and try to head them off. If not, we must swim the lagoon as a last resort."

Dan looked at the waters of the creek and shuddered. It was barely fifty yards across. He could swim it easily, that he knew quite well. He had even been longing to take a header into those placid waters which reflected the blue sky. But he knew the danger which lay hidden there. Only that morning he had seen the evil little eyes and the loathsome, scaly backs of two huge alligators.

Even as he turned to gaze for an instant, he saw a splash and a succeeding ripple disturb the surface, and murmured to himself:

"Hippopotami as well. Gee! what a death-trap the lagoon will be if we are compelled to swim it. No, I will stay here and head off the other beasts."

His reveries were disturbed at that moment by a cry from Jake, who had heard

the trampling of the approaching elephants, and seen the movements which heralded their advent. Tearing down the smaller trees and the lower branches which barred their advance, the foremost rank of the great herd of over two hundred huge beasts broke from the forest.

A mighty bull-elephant with ninety-pounder tusks led the way. Then ensued a scene of wild confusion, as the great monster, his trunk uplifted and waving angrily in the air, trumpeted defiance to the world about him, and came forward at a swinging pace, followed by the whole herd.

Brave as they were, the two boys faltered and became uncertain. Could they stay and face this peril? Nay, they would be trampled to death, even if they were not rent in pieces by those powerful trunks.

"Lost!" cried Jake. "We must run for it. Let us swim the lagoon. It is our only chance."

Dan looked at the lagoon and shuddered again. The nearest bank seemed filled with loathsome, slimy creatures with cruel jaws.

"No!" he muttered between his clenched teeth. "There is death in the river too. We may as well stay here."

"Stand fast, boys!" cried the professor, who alone seemed to retain his calmness. "Aim at the bull, but wait till I give the word."

Both the lads were kneeling now, with their rifles pointed at the most vulnerable spot in the monstrous brute, which, having seen them, was now charging wildly down upon them, anxious to vent its fury upon its nearest foe. It was within fifteen yards of the explorers when their guide spoke again.

"Fire!" he cried in ringing tones.

Again the three rifles spoke almost together. All the shots went home, but Jake's ·303 bullet passed clean through the creature's heart. The monster slackened its pace, sank down upon its knees, and rolled over to within three feet of Dan. For an instant its huge frame quivered, then the beast lay still in death.

"Bravo!" exclaimed the professor, ris-

ing and waving his rifle, and shouting at the maddened beasts in order to deflect their course.

His example inspired the boys, who did likewise. As if by instinct, a second bull-elephant, seeing his rival fall, trumpeted loudly as if calling the herd to follow him, their new leader. The ruse had been successful. The course of the invaders had been changed. Fearful of those reeking tubes which flashed fire and made the forest to reverberate with a thousand echoes, the herd turned from the trail of their dead leader, and followed his rival.

The ground shook to the trampling of their feet, but in five minutes they had disappeared into the forest on the other side, and the rending of branches and trampling of shrubs in that direction, showed that the flight was being continued.

A host of smaller creatures followed in their wake, as the jackal follows the lion. It seemed as if the eastern part of the forest was being entirely cleared by some unseen yet human agency.

"They are gone," whispered Jake. "The elephants are all gone."

"Hush!" whispered the professor. "After the elephants—the Baduri! Get under cover. This is the beginning of the end."

CHAPTER IX

THE CROW'S-NEST IN THE FOREST

BAFFLED in their ingenious and devilish attempt, the hidden Baduri gave vent to a terrible howl of rage. The piercing cry of their leader, which had so alarmed the hunters before, preceded this wild outburst. Then a shower of poisoned arrows, fired from the deadly blow-tubes, sped through the air.

"Lie down!" commanded the guide, anticipating this mode of attack.

The boys did as they were bidden, and fortunate it was for them that the great carcase of the elephant and the dead body of the man-eater gave an added shelter to their tiny barricade.

No less than fifty arrows pierced the ground, the dead beasts, and the abattis. One shaft pierced the professor's sun-helmet, and another grazed Dan's boot.

"Anyone hit?" asked their leader apprehensively. "A scratch from one of those barbed arrows may mean death."

"No, thank heaven!" replied Jake, after making sure the dangerous missile which had touched Dan's boot had not penetrated the stout leather.

"Then lie close a little longer, and pepper away at the vermin through the loopholes, if you catch sight of so much as a limb."

"Where are they, Professor?" asked Jake. "I haven't seen a solitary nigger yet."

"Watch for movements in the trees. They leap about from branch to branch like monkeys. But it's difficult to mark them down. If we can only hit a few of them, however, they may retire to think things over, and thus give us a chance to change camp. These dead carcases on our front will be putrid soon, and will draw all the scavengers in the neighbourhood."

"I see one!" yelled Dan, and fired twice in rapid succession.

Another wild cry from the jungle told

that one of the shots had gone home. There was a rustle amongst the branches, and something leaped or fell to the ground, then lay still.

Angry, gibberish shouts now arose from the edge of the forest. A second and a third flight of arrows followed, and half a dozen more shots were fired as dark limbs were exposed to view for an instant.

"A machine-gun would clear them away," sighed Jake. "What wouldn't I just give for a Lewis with a couple of thousand rounds!"

"They're retiring now, I believe," said the professor, cautiously raising his head above the barricade.

This time only a solitary arrow came from the ambush, and a few more shots in that direction drove the last sentry farther in. The cries and howls of the savages were now heard more faintly.

"The first round is ours," declared Jake, following his leader's action, and rising carefully to his feet, cautiously watching the edge of the forest for any further sign of movement.

"For the moment they are beaten off," said the professor; "but we have not finished with them yet. They will come again in larger numbers at nightfall."

"Is there *no* way of escape?" asked the younger boy, whose face was pale, despite the heroic look in his eyes. And as he spoke, he looked anxiously up into the face of the older man.

"I fear not," replied the guide gravely, "unless——"

"Unless what?" interrupted Jake eagerly.

"Unless the airship returns before dusk."

At these words, a gleam of hope came into the faces of the boys. For the twentieth time that day, they searched the blue vault above their heads for a glimpse of the Zero. But not a speck appeared in the sky. Their very hopes were doomed to disappointment. Perhaps the crew of the airship were in a plight equally bad.

"There is no chance of that, I fear, boys," said the naturalist. "But to-morrow she may be here. She will certainly make for this clearing again at the earliest pos-

sible moment, and her arrival would mean ——"

"Everything!" interposed Dan sadly, surveying the arched vault again.

"If we only had a canoe, Professor," Jake began, "we could perhaps get away safely."

"But if we leave this place, which is a rendezvous for the Zero, we shall be lost. We have only provisions for three days at most. Suppose the airship returned in our absence, what then? Your father and Captain Martin might search the whole of Central Africa without finding us. Rest assured, my brave boys, sooner or later the Zero will return."

"But this will be a lively spot to-night, Professor," said Dan with a shiver, as he remembered with horror the visit of the man-eating lions, and the long queue of jackals, hyenas, and other vicious brutes.

"You are right," replied the guide. "These putrid carcases will attract half the beasts prowling in the jungle. Though we cannot camp here, we must outwit

the Baduri somehow, and seek a healthier spot near by, where we can watch for the Zero."

"I know," exclaimed the younger boy. "Why not rig up a sort of shelter in the trees?"

The professor nodded, lit his pipe, and looked around him for a likely spot. But the giant palm, standing alone in the middle of the clearing, appeared utterly unsuitable for a bivouac or a shelter.

"I have it," cried the younger boy at length, after carefully examining the dark line of the forest from the camp.

"Out with it then," exclaimed his brother.

"You see that small clump of trees on the edge of the lagoon there, where the water enters the thicket?"

"Yes, yes," replied the others eagerly.

"There are about half a dozen of them with the trunks close together and the branches interwoven. They stand a few yards apart from the forest. Let us fix up a nest there. If the Baduri come, they

can only attack us from one side, while the other beasts cannot reach us."

"It might be worth trying," agreed the professor. "If we can only ward the brutes off for another night, all may be well."

As soon, therefore, as the edge of the forest had been carefully examined, in order to make sure that no prying Baduri was within fifty yards of the place, the three set to work. They dragged up the provisions and ammunition boxes to the clump, unloosed the broken cable from the palm tree, grateful that some fifty feet of it remained at their service. This they used to form an improvised armoured barricade by winding it round and round the branches, making a network overlooking the forest. Then they stuffed the interstices with broken branches, leaves and reeds.

While they constructed this aerial conning-tower, some fifteen feet from the ground, cut away a few useless limbs, widened the space, and built up a bulwark, one of their number continually watched the forest, occasionally firing a few rounds

into the thicket to keep at a sufficient distance the prowling Baduri sentries, who still watched them with curious eyes from the hidden depths of tangled undergrowth.

"Why, it's a veritable crow's-nest," cried Jake, laughing, as he surveyed the structure from the ground, after firing another round into the thicket.

"That's not a bad name for it," replied the professor, smiling at the remark.

"Then we'll call it the 'Crow's-Nest,'" chirped in Dan, as he handed up the last batch of ammunition, then kindled a small fire near the tree-roots, and prepared coffee and biscuits for their evening meal.

"A piece of elephant-steak would have been welcome," said the professor, "but we've had no time to carve up the beast, and by this time it will be getting putrid."

"Gee! won't the jackals have a feast to-night?" said Jake.

"Yes, elephant-steak and haunch of lion for their supper," declared Dan; "unless those beastly crocodiles come ashore to forestall them."

"Guess there'll be a battle-royal over the tit-bits in the clearing there," added the naturalist, nodding towards the carcases as he soaked a ship's biscuit in his steaming coffee.

"And we should have been part of the tit-bits, I reckon, but for this bright idea of yours, Dan, my boy," said the elder boy, patting his brother affectionately on the shoulder.

"What would they say of this at St. Chad's?" asked Dan, whose mind had been dwelling very much amongst his school chums during the last few minutes.

"Christopher! I'd forgotten all about St. Chad's," replied Jake. "Fancy, it's only about ten days since we broke up for the long holidays, and here we are, tree'd in Central Africa already. And what's more, I feel as if I'd been here for ages. St. Chad's is only a memory, old man. If ever we get back there——"

"If ever—Snakes! what's that?"

A rustling in the undergrowth not a dozen yards away made both the lads

to start, seize their rifles, and point them in the direction of the noise.

"A python. Don't fire!" cried the professor. "You'll require all your ammunition presently, or I'm mistaken."

The monstrous serpent reared its head, opened wide its jaws, and hissed at the boys like boiling steam. But not liking the appearance of things, it turned and sped with amazing rapidity across the clearing and entered the thicket on the other side.

"What an ugly brute!" exclaimed Jake, recovering himself. "I declare it gave me an awful fright."

The sun was now resting on the edge of the forest, and darkness would fall shortly. But there was no sign of the airship. Already the hideous cry of the hyena, the jackal, and the distant rumble of the lion, showed what they must shortly expect. But the four-footed creatures were not to be their worst enemies.

With the closing in of night, the fierce pygmies had determined to capture the

intruders, dead or alive, and they were now preparing for the final scene.

"Shinko-Mola-Kwonga-la!" arose their fierce war chant in the distance, as with numbers swollen almost to an army, they approached the camp of the white men.

CHAPTER X

THE CAPTIVES OF SHINKO

THAT night, as the watchers looked down upon the jungle clearing, it seemed to them that all the denizens of the forest had come to feast upon the half-putrid remains of the day's slaughter. The wild creatures made night hideous with their horrid quarrelsome din. When later the moon, now almost full, rose above the tree-tops, the hunters from their exalted position, concealed from view amid the foliage, looked down with loathsome and nauseated feeling at the grim and ghastly banquet.

Snarling and growling as they snatched the putrid morsels from each other's jaws, two lesser animals fought a battle-royal, until, with a terrible roar, the king of beasts himself appeared upon the scene. The man-eater sniffed the air uneasily as

though his keen sense suspected danger. He himself, however, did not join the feast. But for a moment, as he stood there, with head and tail erect, mounted upon the carcase of the elephant, he thundered his challenge to the beasts of the forest, and the meaner creatures withdrew and waited for the offal.

But the lion had not killed, and therefore, though hungry, he would not eat, for the king of beasts does not belong to the carrion tribe.

While the hunters surveyed this moonlight scene, the crafty Baduri, who knew quite well where the white men were hid, launched their attack.

A terrific yell from the thicket was the signal for a shower of barbed arrows, and the fierce war-chant of "Shinko-Mola-Kwonga-la!" commencing in modulated tones, and ending in a wild frenzied shriek, intended as a challenge, smote the ears of the defenders.

"Fire!" ordered the professor, and while the two boys gave rapid rounds with their

rifles, their leader emptied the two barrels of his sporting-gun, loaded with swan-shot, into the thicket on their front.

"Keep under cover!" urged the guide, fearful lest his companions in their eagerness should offer a target to the enemy.

The slender barricade was half smothered with arrows, which had become embedded in the bark, turf and broken branches which they had erected, and still the missiles came.

It was impossible to see what damage had been done to the enemy, for the target they offered as they leapt from branch to branch was infinitesimal. But after the discharge of the shot-gun, with its wide-spreading cornucopia of jacketed lead, savage yells of pain reached the ears of the defenders.

"Somebody's getting it!" chuckled Jake. "They're not finding it quite so easy as they imagined."

"Here goes again!" said the professor, giving the enemy another double dose of swan-shot.

More yells followed the discharge of the

sporting-gun, for, though the wounds thus inflicted could scarcely be mortal, yet the recipients who tasted lead were far more numerous. But the danger became momentarily more and more pressing. Numbers swarmed on numbers, and though, after each discharge, several screaming, gesticulating savages leaped more clumsily, or fell headlong to the ground, others were ready to take their places.

The trees in front were now swarming with agile figures, shouting, yelling and leaping. It seemed to Dan, who was a trifle dazed, that the whole forest was moving. Certain it was that the savages were now so near that they were attempting to leap upon the upper and lower branches of the trees, where, behind their slim barricade, the hunters were hidden.

The resources of the white men were not yet exhausted, however. The professor had landed from the airship a Verey pistol with ammunition, and a small box of hand-grenades. The Vereys were for signalling to or from the airship, and the hand-grenades

were intended for just such an emergency as this.

"Stand ready, boys!" he cried. "This is getting too serious. Pick your men when I send up a Verey."

The lads waited and watched through the loopholes down the tubes of their rifles.

Bang-swis-s-h! went up a green light, sailing over the tree-tops, and lighting up the landscape with a glare which amazed and terrified not only the Baduri, but also the savage four-footed beasts below.

Even while the light soared upwards, the rifles cracked, and the shot-gun spoke, and then, to add to the terror and fear of the enemy, a couple of hand-grenades were hurled towards the spot where the Baduri appeared to be in greatest force.

Timed for four seconds, the bombs burst in rapid succession, and the flying fragments of steel, exploding so unexpectedly amongst the trees, terrified the enemy, who hastily withdrew with shouts of anger and pain as nearly a dozen of their com-

rades fell headlong through the branches towards the earth.

"Phew! They've done," declared Jake, glad of a respite.

"Don't you believe it, sonny," returned the naturalist, wiser than his friends in the lore of the forest, and the traditions of the Baduri.

"They will never give up while there are a dozen of them alive. They will come back again soon. Our only hope is that the crew of the Zero may have seen the Verey light."

"The airship! Ah, I had forgotten," reflected Dan, who in the heat of the combat had forgotten everything save the presence of that deadly enemy on their front. He had even forgotten that one of those dangerous arrows had grazed his arm, till just now, the professor, noting a trickle of blood on the lad's sleeve, exclaimed:

"Why, you're wounded, laddie! This is serious. You should have told me at once."

"It's only a scratch, sir," replied the boy, "and there was no time to speak of it during that sharp fusillade."

"Roll up your sleeve, quickly," ordered the guide, almost sternly.

Dan did so, and while Jake kept watch above and below, the professor opened a small leather case containing a few instruments, medicines, poison antidotes, etc., which was attached to his belt. Enlarging the wound, he caused it to bleed freely, applied the antidote, then quickly and skilfully bandaged it. It was all he could do, for at that very instant Jake gave vent to a terrific yell, as the black crafty face of a Baduri suddenly appeared over the edge of the barricade, within two feet of him, and raised a bright flashing blade above his head.

Jake, who had been repairing a breach of the barricade with the hatchet, instinctively turned upon the intruder, and brought down the keen blade upon the head of the savage.

With a snarl like that of a wild beast,

the Baduri dropped like a stone, writhed for a moment on the ground, then lay still near the root of the tree.

"That was a narrow shave," said the professor, alarmed at this unlooked-for intrusion. "But I said they would soon come back again, and look there! By heaven, the ground's swarming with them. We are surrounded!"

It proved only too true. Baffled and defeated in their attempt at a frontal attack through the trees, the wily Baduri were now attempting other measures to secure their enemy. Leaving the forest at another point, they had crawled quietly and softly along the ground, heedless of the brutes which still fought and growled over the carcases. And at this moment the savages were attempting to ascend the trees and set fire to the crow's-nest in order to drive the occupants out.

"Shinko-Mola-Kwonga-la!" again rose the cry from the savages, who, seeing they were discovered, now rose to their feet and rushed towards the trees, uttering that

wild strange battle-cry, which always ended in a terrible yell.

It was Faro himself, the high priest of the sacred city and temple of Nophar, who commenced the chant. His tall commanding figure and his outstretched hand were seen for an instant, and his voice was heard urging the Baduri forward.

"Burn the trees and take them alive!" he ordered. "They are the captives of Shinko; they must be sacrificed at his altar."

The Baduri dared not disobey. They laid aside their poisoned arrows, using others less dangerous, and their long gleaming hunting-knives.

One rapid shot was fired by the professor at Faro, but it missed by a hair's-breadth, and before another opportunity could offer, the heroic defenders were besieged by a swarm of agile pygmies who climbed up the stems and endeavoured to storm the crow's-nest by sheer force of numbers.

"Defend yourselves to the last, boys!" cried the professor, though his brave heart

almost sank within him, for he saw the utter hopelessness of their present plight.

A couple more hand-grenades flung amongst the attackers on the ground put a number of the assailants *hors de combat.* But the danger was now too close at hand for this mode of warfare. The three defenders fired as quickly as they could load, and added to the casualties of the enemy. But even loading in that narrow confined space soon became impossible.

" They're firing the crow's-nest ! " shouted Dan.

But the defenders were too busy giving and parrying blows with the butt-ends of their weapons, warding off those horrible knives which flashed in the moonlight, to notice the gleam of fire below and the smoke which now began to curl upwards all around them.

At this moment several of the more daring of the Baduri actually reached the upper branches above the crow's-nest, having leaped an almost incredible distance from the nearest trees.

"Look out!" exclaimed Jake. "The rascals are above us!"

What followed, none of the defenders could ever exactly explain, save that, taken at a disadvantage, overwhelmed by numbers of wild, frenzied creatures, half-ape, half-human in appearance, with ugly, grinning, devilish faces, they fought and struggled in a narrow confined space on a dangerous and slippery foothold.

Through the smoke hellish faces gleamed at the Englishmen and knives flashed, inflicting wounds. Then, one by one, the semi-conscious defenders succumbed to murderous hands which clutched at their throats and toppled them helpless, half-blinded with blood and smoke, down to the clutches of the dark villains below.

A strange voice now sounded in their ears, speaking in commanding tones, before which the savages quailed. It was the voice of Faro, who, in a weird and unfamiliar language, ordered:

"Take them alive; they are the captives of Shinko, the green-eyed god."

CHAPTER XI

THE CITY OF NOPHAR

BOUND hand and foot, the three victims, faint and but semi-conscious of all that was happening, were then carried through the hidden paths of the dense jungle, which stretched in every direction, from the open clearing in which they had been encamped.

To Dan, parched with thirst, and suffering from the high fever which had followed his poison wound, the terrible journey seemed endless. Again and again, he tried to rouse himself, and muttered feebly :

" Water . . . water ! Give me water to drink."

He even made signs, as well as he was able, to the dusky forms about him. But they heeded him not, for, in their eyes, he was but a captive of Shinko, to be offered up shortly as an oblation to pacify the green-eyed god.

Jake heard his brother's voice, and called to him feebly to endure and hope for the best. But his own plight was little better. He had received several nasty wounds in the late encounter, and the thongs of elephant hide which bound him were so tight, that they chafed him fearfully. His stout heart, however, was still unvanquished, and if, at that moment, he had been free with only a knife for a weapon, he would have fought his way through the savages to the succour of his brother. But he realized that all efforts at escape would be futile. And he steeled his heart as well as he might, against the end of this strange and horrible adventure, which he knew would be—death.

"Poor Dan," he muttered. "We thought it was to be a great and a glorious adventure, hunting elephants, lions, antelopes and giraffes, and sailing calmly over jungle and forest—and this is the end of it all."

Then he lay back and groaned as he thought of his father, and wondered what misfortune had befallen the crew of the Zero.

"When will the airship return? What will father think when he finds we are gone?" he murmured.

And he looked up through the dark jungle, where, here and there, through an opening, he saw the sheen of the stars, then listened to the strange war-chant of the Baduri, who seemed to be taking them through long and devious ways, bridging swamps over fallen logs, but never stopping on their seemingly endless journey.

"Where are they taking us, I wonder?" he asked himself again and again. And in his pain and anguish, he longed for the dawn and a speedy death to end his present torment.

The professor alone retained his cheerful spirit. He had experienced too many adventures amongst savage tribes to lose all hope. Moreover, he was strong and hardened to the rigours of the climate, and his busy brain was already scheming to find a way out of the present tangle.

Though he spoke not, he listened acutely to every word that was spoken. His know-

ledge of native African dialects was as profound as his Latin and Greek. Before long, he pieced together broken fragments of speech which reached him from his captors.

His acute mind picked up the words 'Shinko, Faro, and Nophar,' and he found to his joy, that the language of the savages was not very unlike that of the score of wild tribes who dwell in the hinterland of Northern Nigeria. Again he listened, and from more broken fragments of comment, this is what he surmised the Baduri were saying about their captives :

"Shinko, the green-eyed god, will be appeased with the blood of the white travellers. Faro will offer the sacrifices on the feast of the full moon. Then we shall have dancing and feasting, for the great god will be pleased. All the maidens of Nophar will join in the dance."

All this naturally aroused both curiosity and dismay in the mind of Professor Gregory. The news that they were to be offered as sacrifices to a heathen deity was not comforting, to say the least. But

the tidings that they were to visit the mysterious city of Nophar, so long sought after in vain by white travellers, was some consolation to this daring explorer. If it had not been for his anxiety on account of the two boys, he would have welcomed this new adventure, despite the imminent risk of death which it entailed.

A little later, however, as the first faint tinge of dawn broke through the interlaced bowery overhead, further scraps of conversation, which the professor was able to piece together, brought him even more interesting news.

"Pity that Toucan, the brave young chief, must also die," observed one man.

"Who will lead us against the mighty elephant herd, when Toucan the lion-slayer is dead?" remarked his companion.

"But he has declared that the phantom bird, the great white albatross, the brother of Shinko, brought the white men and dropped them down from the clouds," said a third speaker.

"He speaks with a forked tongue,"

announced a firm, penetrating voice at this juncture. This was none other than Faro, the high priest himself, who had overheard the conversation relating to Toucan.

The savages quailed before this man, for they had reason. But though they feared him, yet secretly they hated him. To this fierce, corrupt, scheming man, they were but as little children. Their very lives, and the lives of their wives and children were in his hand. By a single wave of his hand, he could command their death.

"Toucan, for his treachery, shall not even perish like the unfaithful Baduri," continued the priest. "He has falsely declared that the reign of Shinko is ended because the great white bird has arrived."

"Toucan shall die!" cried the savages, fearing to oppose the will of Faro.

"He shall die with the white men at the altar of Shinko," replied the priest, angrily. "The great white bird, the brother of Shinko, will not come to reign for another thousand years, and, until that time, the

green-eyed god will rule the Baduri, for the sacred oracles in the temple of Nophar have told it to the wise men long ago."

"False Toucan shall die," repeated the savages. "At the feast of the full moon he shall perish with the white men; for the great and mighty Faro has spoken."

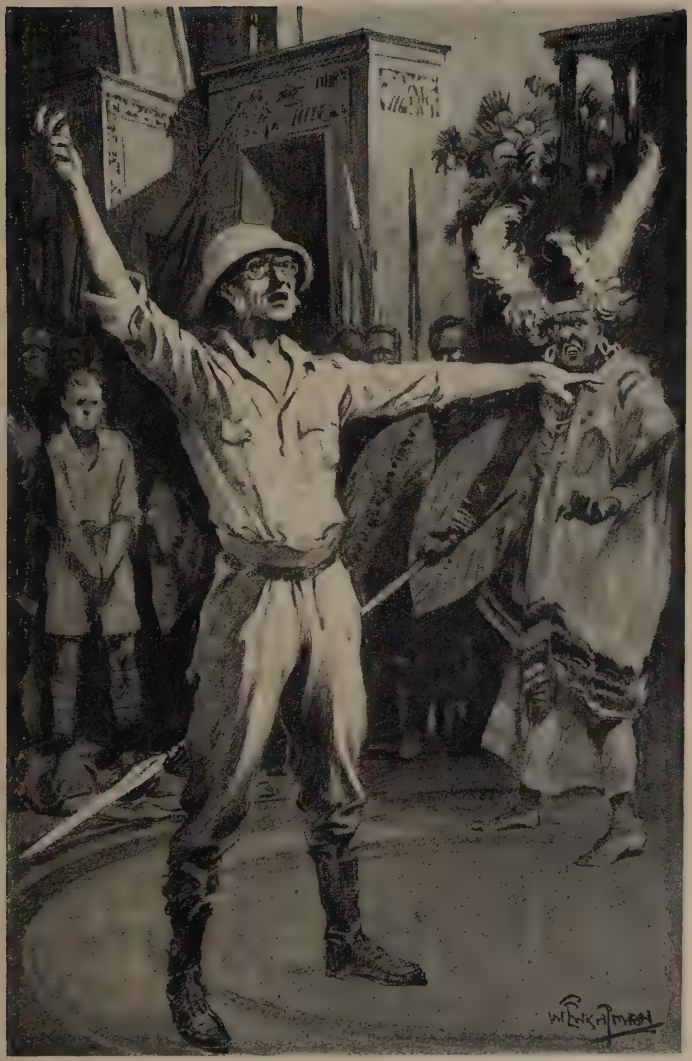
Thus were the simple hearts of these fierce tribesmen influenced and swayed by this crafty and powerful man. But nothing of all this was lost upon the white traveller. Here was food for reflection, and possibly a way of escape.

"This young chieftain, Toucan, is a rival of Faro," he thought. "He has also a following of his own. While Faro is hated and dreaded, Toucan is loved. But Toucan has caught sight of the airship, though his words are not believed. I wonder where he can have seen it? Did he see it before or after the storm? If this young chief had seen the Zero, then others of his tribe may have observed it, but are afraid to declare it. For it seems that the coming of the airship clashes with one of those

strange, old legends, which every wild African tribe possesses, and implicitly believes." Thus ran the current of the professor's thoughts.

By now the dawn had fully come. The trees overhead were alive with songsters, and chattering monkeys, welcoming the return of the sun. Then, suddenly the forest ended, and they were in the open country. The dark, dank forest and the fever swamps with their unhealthy vapours and deadly miasma were left behind. The morning sun shone brilliantly, without that terrible heat as yet which would mark its later journey across the sky. And as the long line of savages bearing their prisoners debouched upon the sunlit plain, one mighty shout arose.

"Nophar! Nophar!" they cried, for there in the hollow of the clearing, ringed by the dense jungle and the dark rim of the forest, rose a quaint, miniature dome, surrounded by pinnacles. These were overlaid with gold, and flashed back the rays of the sun from between the rows of palms



"The Professor . . . lifted his right hand slowly to the heavens, making an arc as though indicating the great desert behind the northern jungle."

and cypress trees, by which the sacred building was surrounded.

All that human art and priestly cunning had been able to devise, had given to the building a rich and romantic setting.

Twelve giant cedars stood like sentinels to guard the outer court, where, on the green sward, watered by a pure stream, the sacred deer browsed. The building had cloisters, courts and cells, and, all about it was a low but maze-like growth which extended some hundred yards on every side, through which led secret and narrow paths to the different courts.

Immediately the Baduri beheld the temple and the clustering, mud-walled huts of the village without, they laid their burdens down, and fell with their faces to the ground, muttering strange and gibberish incantations, while even Faro, though he alone remained standing, bowed his forehead in silent worship towards the holy building.

The professor seized the opportunity, raised his head and looked about him. Rise to his feet he could not, because of

his bonds. But one glimpse of the temple with its flashing dome, told him all he wanted to know.

"This is the remnant of the lost Atlantis, the city and temple of Nophar," he mused. "Those flashing minarets can be seen for fifty miles from the air. The airship will find this place as easily as it found the Niger. If we can delay matters a little while, we may yet escape."

Then he struggled to get a glimpse of the boys, and quietly hailed them, but they answered him not, for, while Dan was now in a raging fever, and entirely oblivious of all that was passing about him, Jake had succumbed to extreme fatigue and was sleeping peacefully.

"Silence, Dog!" warned one of the bearers.

"Water!" gasped the explorer, speaking softly in the Baduri tongue, and pointing first to a brook which purled close by, and then to his own parched mouth.

The Baduri warrior hesitated, but, hearing his own language in the mouth of the

stranger, opened wide his eyes. He was utterly astonished. This simple request was not granted, however, and the party restarting, soon reached the village.

Here, the tinkle of golden bells announced the coming of a little procession of the priestly order who met them. Then the villagers who had come to see the prisoners joined the warriors, now standing at a respectful distance, and watched in awe, while the white captives of Shinko were taken by the priests within the maze which guarded the outer courts of the mysterious temple.

"Unbind the prisoners!" cried Faro. And his command, uttered in that same piercing voice which the hunters had heard from the crow's nest, was quickly obeyed. Three of the lesser priests stepped forward and cut the thongs.

The professor was quickly upon his feet, but not till he had chafed his limbs for some minutes could he stand erect. Jake attempted to rise also, but could not, for his limbs had been so tightly bound that he could not use them. As for the younger

boy, when his bonds were severed, he made no effort to rise, but lay still moaning unintelligible words.

"Let him lie there!" ordered Faro. "He is but carrion for the beasts." Then, turning fiercely upon the explorer, he hissed:

"So you came as other white men have come, to steal the gold of Nophar?"

The professor, now able to stand erect, though still weak and feeble, confronted his dark-faced accuser courageously, fixing him with his keen, grey eyes, then answered steadily—

"Gold?" he said. "What care I for gold?" stretching his arm about him as he spoke, as if to indicate that all the gold in the world, even the earth itself, belonged to him, if he so wished it.

It was a daring ruse which the professor had determined upon. But the times were desperate. He knew that his end had been arranged, that he was to die in two days' time. The only possible chance of escape was to work upon the fears and super-

stitions of his captors, and the assembled Baduri who had followed them into the inner court, and were now standing in awed silence, awaiting the course of events. The fact that the white man could make himself understood in the Baduri tongue had already made a very great impression upon his listeners.

A gasp of astonishment rose from the audience at these daring words. It had been expected that the captive would fall upon his knees and become a suppliant for mercy. But, towering in height above the heads of the Baduri, equal in stature to Faro himself, and equally imposing in appearance, the prisoner never once flinched before his tormentor.

"How did you come here?" demanded the now enraged priest, laying his right hand threateningly upon the long, pointed dagger at his girdle.

"Ask Toucan!" was the brief reply.

The eyes of the high priest flashed at this unexpected retort, and, for a moment, he winced before this doughty foe.

"Who brought you across the impassable swamps?" he demanded fiercely.

The professor, who until now, with arms folded across his breast, had regarded his enemies with the utmost composure, lifted his right hand slowly to the heavens, making an arc as though indicating the great desert behind the northern jungle, and replied:

"On the wings of the great white bird I came from the northern land, and sailed through the heavens across the mighty desert, to look into the eyes of Shinko, the great god of the Baduri!"

A hush of expectancy greeted these words, before which even Faro quailed for an instant, wondering how this white stranger had come to know of these things. Other travellers of this hated race, who had come before, had learnt none of these mysteries. Moreover, they had all become suppliants for mercy, though mercy had always been denied them.

How should he deal with this arrogant stranger? Pity he had been spared till this moment. The tribesmen had heard

his words. They were murmuring strange things to each other already. What if they should acclaim this stranger, and dethrone their high priest? That reference to Toucan, his hated rival, had been particularly unfortunate. But Faro proved equal to the occasion—

"Your medicine is powerful," he hissed. "But your tongue speaks lies. You shall indeed look into the eyes of Shinko, but it shall be as an offering to the green-eyed god. To-morrow, at the great feast of the full moon, you and your companions shall die, and Toucan shall perish with you!"

CHAPTER XII

A GRIM SPECTRE

THE prisoners received the sentence of death calmly. Jake, who was supporting his brother, kneeling upon the ground, had just sufficiently aroused Dan to take a little interest in these awful proceedings, in which they were so mightily interested.

If at that moment, however, the professor who had several times eagerly scanned the heavens for a glimpse of the airship, had only been enabled to point to the great white bird, as a powerful evidence of truth, that moment the reign of Faro would have been ended. None knew better than the explorer how the feelings of the listening Baduri had been worked up to a pitch of intense excitement. But he knew also that they were expecting, in their superstitious minds, some miracle or supernatural event to confirm their mounting

beliefs in the powers of the white travellers.

But the heavens were not propitious. There was no sign of the airship anywhere. The acute mind of the white prisoner, however, did not despair. His mental faculties searched every possible avenue for a chance of escape.

Faro, on the other hand, knew in his own soul, that despite his craft and cunning he was no match for his opponent. He therefore desired to end the interview as quickly as possible, consign the victims to the death-chamber, taking care to leave upon the credulous minds of his followers the impression that, despite his cunning, the white man was but an enemy to Shinko, and his children the Baduri.

"Listen, Children of the Baduri," commenced the high priest, turning now to the tribesmen, whose faltering minds had given him some uneasiness. "These white men are enemies and robbers. They come not to worship the green-eyed god, but to rob you of your heritage, and to steal your wives and children."

"Mola-Kwonga-la!" came the answering shout, which showed how easily these savage hearts were stirred by such words.

"They come with lies on their tongues. The White Albatross, the brother of Shinko comes not for another thousand years. But these crafty men have learnt his secret. It is not to worship the green-eyed god, but to plunder his temple and his shrine, that they have come uninvited to the sacred city of Nophar, from which no invader has yet returned. Shall these men return?"

"Mola-Kwonga-la! Death to the white men!" came the cry again, this time full throated from the dark audience, who would gladly at that moment have put the adventurers to death. But with some appearance of justice and mercy, the crafty priest interfered.

"Nay, not now," he declared, lifting high his hand, as if to swear by the sun. "To-morrow is the feast of the full moon. To-night they shall lie securely in the death-chamber, surrounded by the wealth

and treasures of Nophar, which shall never be theirs, and to-morrow they shall die."

With a mighty shout the tribesmen, who now regarded the captives as enemies worthy only of death, signified their unanimous approval of this just sentence.

"Take them away, and guard them securely!" commanded Faro, feeling that at last, he had sufficiently restored his prestige in the eyes of his ignorant followers.

The gaolers, six in number, to whom the task was entrusted, stepped forward, and, seizing the prisoners, carried them away, as the professor, looking full at the high-priest, and raising his forefinger menacingly to the sky, concluded:

"Beware, thou false priest of Nophar! Beware the feast of the full moon!"

Then the captives were hurried away, through narrow, dark, winding corridors, Dan being supported by his brother, until at length, after what seemed an unending journey, they were thrust into a large room, dimly lit from a vaulted roof, and, with a few small cakes of maize, and a bowl of

water to drink, they were securely bolted and barred from the rest of the world.

"Well, thank goodness, this is the end!" said Jake, when at length he found an opportunity of speaking.

"Nay, there is still a chance, and a very good one, lads," returned the professor, stepping up to Dan, feeling his pulse, examining his tongue, then unrolling his little leather case containing his medical supplies and instruments, the only thing which the savages had left. This, they had either missed, or for superstitious reasons had left severely alone.

"How? Tell us how?" pleaded both the boys, who had given up all hope.

The professor first examined the wounds which the lads had received, found them only slight, noted that Dan's fever was abating, gave each of them a few drops of a powerful restorative from a small phial, shared out the maize and the water, which all drank eagerly, then explained as follows:

"The Zero!" he began.

"The airship?" chorused the boys.

"Yes, it is not far away. It will return in time to save us."

"How did you learn this?" asked Jake eagerly, his strength returning as a new hope filled his soul.

"The Baduri have seen it."

"Really?"

"Yes. One of their young chiefs is now imprisoned for declaring that we have been dropped from the clouds, and that a large, white bird brought us across the northern desert and the fever swamps which cut off the city of Nophar from the rest of Africa. It seems that this tribe have a legend, as most of these wild tribes have, but this one has a peculiar significance for us."

"How so?"

"It relates to the coming of a great phantom bird, called the 'White Albatross' the brother of their god Shinko. In their superstitious fancy, they believe that these brothers reign alternately for a long period of time. The legend reminds me very much of the older Greek stories, and at any other

time would interest me immensely, bound up as it is with this mysterious priesthood and temple of Nophar. But at the present moment, its peculiar significance is, that if we are able to use it, it may enable us to escape. Other questions of a mythological and archæological nature, connecting this strange temple and separate priesthood of Atlantis, may interest us and the whole world later. But for us, the dominant question now is, how can we escape?"

The boys, who had not yet had time to look about them much, or even to notice their strange surroundings in the dim light from the vaulted roof, began seriously to ponder what the words of the professor meant.

"Do you think, Professor," asked Dan, weakly, "that the Zero will pass this place again?"

"I feel certain it will," replied the courageous guide." Those flashing cupolas and minarets can be seen for fifty miles or more from the air. Capt. Martin cannot miss them. And when he sees them, he

will be sure to descend if only to institute inquiries, when he finds that we have left the clearing."

"But there are only three of them left now. Suppose they were overwhelmed and fell into the hands of this crafty priesthood. What could prevent them from suffering the fate which is held out to us?"

"The very moment the airship is sighted by the keen eyes of the Baduri, that moment Faro and his priesthood will be in danger. These superstitious savages are already inclined to believe Toucan. The appearance of the airship would definitely decide the point in our favour, and I believe that Faro would take to his heels and flee into the jungle to save his own miserable life."

"But will the airship come in time?" asked Dan.

"That, of course, is the only disturbing factor," said the professor a little uneasily. "I must think out some course of action that will delay these vicious brutes. We must work still further on their superstition. It's our only chance."

At that instant, Dan, who had been trying to soften a morsel of the hard, rock-like maize cake, by dipping it in his goblet of water, exclaimed :

" Why this goblet is made of gold, professor ! See how it sparkles, and shines ; and those must be real gems by which it is ornamented."

" And so is mine ! " said the professor calmly, holding it up for the others to see.

" And mine also," cried Jake, springing to his feet in astonishment. " And I do declare that this stool on which I have been sitting is a monster nugget of the same precious metal."

" Christopher ! " gasped Dan. " What sort of people are these who supply even their prisoners with golden goblets to drink out of ? "

The professor smiled at this remark, then added : " They are the cruellest people in the world. Look there ! "

There was an alarming note in the professor's words, which caused the boys to look in the direction indicated. Their eyes

were now becoming accustomed to the curious light which flooded the room, and the sight which they now beheld caused their blood to turn icy-cold.

"Why, it is a skeleton!" gasped Dan, springing away from the loathsome object in horror.

"And it was once a white man," declared the naturalist, fearlessly approaching the ghastly thing, and stooping to examine it in his usual calm and deliberate manner.

CHAPTER XIII

THE TREASURE CHAMBER

AS they gazed upon the ghastly trophy, their feelings of horror changed to wonder, for they noted that the skeleton, still clad in partial clothing, which hung in decayed strips about the whitened bones, was chained by golden fetters to a pillar. A necklace of rubies and pearls, worth a king's ransom, hung about the dead man's neck. Scattered about his feet lay golden ingots, and blocks of silver of a size and weight whose value would have built another city.

"Ah, the cruel beasts!" exclaimed the professor, whose quick mind had already read the secret of the man's terrible death.

"What does it mean?" asked the younger boy.

"He was a white explorer, perhaps an adventurer seeking for gold. The Baduri

captured him and brought him in. And the cruel, crafty Faro then left him to die of starvation in this golden chamber, the treasure-house of Nophar," replied the older man sadly.

"Did he starve to death?" quivered Jake, feeling a strange chill at his heart.

"Yes, look! They even placed goblets of water, and sumptuous food in golden vessels just beyond his reach. See, the water has long ago evaporated, and the food rotted or been eaten by rats or other creatures. But amid all this wealth, he has starved to death. The sight of the food, and all this gold, would probably turn his brain."

"What a horrible death!" reflected Dan, with a shudder. "Fancy perishing of hunger amid all this wealth."

"This explains why no white man who set out to search for the gold of Nophar ever returned," observed Jake. "I wonder what the poor fellow thought when he was dying."

"He would die raving like a madman," said their leader. "See how the fetters

are bent and twisted. That shows how he strained to reach the food placed so mockingly outside his reach. To this poor adventurer a crust of dry bread and a sip of water would have been worth all the wealth in the world. When he had his liberty his only wish was for gold. But when he was chained to a pillar of gold in the world's treasure house, he pined only for liberty."

The lesson was not lost on the boys. They had no wish even to touch the costly necklace, or the golden ingots. At that moment they hated the very sight of the precious metal, and they themselves longed for liberty more than anything else in the wide, wide world.

"They may keep their gold if only we can escape from this horrible death chamber," declared Dan, with a feeling of apprehension as to their own impending fate. And both his comrades agreed with him.

"But they have not chained us, neither have they left us without food," declared

Jake, trying to rouse the spirits of his companions.

"No, I think I convinced that fiend, Faro, that we had not come in search of gold, or that white man's fate would assuredly have been ours. I think that cunning priest is a little bit afraid of us. The fact that Toucan, the young chieftain, declared that he saw us descend from the phantom bird has unsettled the villain. He is afraid to kill us immediately, lest he should give offence to the Baduri, who evidently hold Toucan in high estimation."

"He may himself have seen the airship," said Dan, whose quick mind was again at work, trying to find some avenue of escape.

"It is quite possible," agreed the professor, as they turned away from the fearful spectre which they had been examining until now. "But unless the Zero returns and finds the city of Nophar before to-morrow, when the feast of the full moon begins, I'm afraid that Faro will gain his point."

"Still, while there's life there's hope," opined the cheerful Jake, who despite his

bandaged, aching head, still maintained a resolute heart, mainly for the sake of poor Dan.

"You're right, Jake," said the professor, smiling, and extending his hand towards the optimist. "It's my belief that either the airship will return in time to save us, or that something else will turn up. Meantime, there's one shot in the locker which those pygmies who searched me forgot."

"What's that?" asked both boys in one breath.

"One small hand-grenade which I had secreted behind the lining of my helmet," said the older man, smiling, as he withdrew from its hiding-place in his topee a small but very powerful grenade, adding:

"If the worst comes to the worst, this will suffice for that evil-faced Faro."

This news cheered the lads not a little, and when, later in the day, they found that further supplies of food and water were thrust into the chamber through a sliding panel in the wall, and the professor assured them that the cakes were not poisoned,

nor the water polluted, their spirits rose still further. So the weary day dragged on and night came.

Watching by turns lest some treachery should befall them, they dozed or slept through the long hours of darkness. But when morning came, and no tidings of the airship reached them, despite their attempts to cheer each other up, their forebodings became only too evident.

Throughout the day they listened intently to every sound which reached them through those thick walls. They heard, or imagined they heard, the chanting of the priests in the temple overhead at daybreak. Outside from the native village, they heard the sound of tom-toms and other festive instruments, for the great day of the feast of the full moon had arrived, and the whole Baduri tribe, raised to the highest pitch of excitement, were all eagerly waiting for the great event, which was to take place at the rising of the full moon, shortly after sunset.

Songs and shouting occasionally reached

them, coming from the excited populace, and once, amid the intervals of wild yells and screams, as though some minor sacrifices were already being offered, Jake felt sure that he heard the familiar whir-r-r of propellers.

"It must be the airship!" he declared, springing to his feet, and dancing around the grinning skeleton, which always seemed to challenge his optimism.

Again they listened acutely, but no one else heard it, and Jake's tumultuous spirits fell, while his face grew two shades paler.

"If it is the Zero, she has passed over some distance away, and may not have been sighted by the Baduri," concluded the professor.

"You know that my hearing is very good, sir," insisted Jake. "The airship may, as you say, have passed over the forest some distance away, for the sound of propellers travels a long way, even through stone walls. But I feel certain that I heard the Zero. She would be travelling towards our old camp in the clearing, and when

she finds we are gone, they will return here, for they must have seen the city and the temple."

"Let us hope so!" said the older man, who appeared to be buried in thought, as though contemplating some desperate final effort before the end came.

So the morning passed away, and the afternoon faded into early twilight, and the prisoners' hopes began to wane. The food which had been left at midday remained untasted. The phantom of death was knocking at the door, and their hearts began to sink.

"The airship has failed us, I fear," said the professor quietly, for they spoke in furtive whispers now, and there was a twitching of the lips as they conversed.

"Then I at least will die fighting," declared Jake, and he began to collect around him such small ingots of precious metal as he could most easily wield, should their executioners descend suddenly upon them.

Terrified shrieks and appalling cries still

reached their ears occasionally, as though other victims were being done to death by the cruel priests of Nophar.

With scarcely a word now, the prisoners awaited the coming of their cruel gaolers, which they knew could not be much longer delayed. They had taken up positions of vantage amongst the treasure, piling up a little barricade of ingots about them, while the professor, with a steely glint in his grey eyes, lovingly fingered his small grenade.

The heavy panelled wall of the treasure house was behind them, as they crouched in a distant corner, and waited, while the gloom deepened.

"In one hour the moon will rise," whispered the old man gravely. "That is the time appointed for our death."

A grim silence followed these words, but a fierce, surging anger rose in every heart. Jake felt for Dan's feebler hand, and held it in his own big paw. He noticed that it was clammy and tremulous, and whispered in his brother's ear:

"Cheer up, Danny! We have a fighting chance yet. I'm good for three of those ugly, dark-skinned devils, and the professor there will mark down that devil of a priest."

Before the younger boy, still in the throes of a tropical fever, resulting from the poisoned wound, could answer, a slight grating noise immediately behind them arrested their attention, and they turned to look.

A small panel in the wall had been deftly slid aside, and there, framed in the aperture, some ten inches square, like the face of a painted villain, gleamed the crafty, cunning face of the high priest himself, not five feet away.

"Jake!" gasped the younger boy, seized by sudden terror.

But the face had disappeared as quickly as it had come. Horror of horrors, they must have been watched by unseen eyes during the whole of their incarceration. It was too true, for the crafty priests from hidden places had spied upon their every movement.

"Sapristi!" exclaimed the professor,

raising his right hand to fling the grenade. But the secret panel was already closed. And at that instant, the wall itself seemed to open, and with wild cries of "Shinko-Mola-Kwonga-la!" the room was filled as if by magic, by leaping, shouting, devilish beings, who seized the prisoners, bound their hands behind their backs, and chanting a weird incantation, which appeared to be a death song, hurried the captives off to execution.

CHAPTER XIV

A TROPICAL STORM

WHEN the airship broke from her moorings in the height of that terrible gale, it was almost a miracle that she was not instantly wrecked. The pressure of the helium in her gas-bag, however, gave her just sufficient upward drive to clear the edge of the forest. But another giant palm, standing high above the rest of the trees, smashed her starboard propeller to atoms, and seriously damaged her rudder.

In the hands of a less skilful commander, the Zero would have been ripped to pieces, and her heroic crew would have been lost. The last cubic foot of gas which the major had been pumping into the huge envelope when she broke away, undoubtedly saved them all from disaster, and spared the aerial navigators to take part in an even more thrilling adventure a few days later.

The collision with the upper branches of the forest giant and the splintering of the propeller caused them sufficient alarm, however. For a couple of seconds they feared that the gas-bag had been ripped open. But a vivid flash of lightning, as the Zero rebounded from the obstacle, and mounted into the upper air, revealed at once the extent of the damage.

"Cut out the engines!" ordered Captain Martin through the megaphone.

"Aye, aye, sir!" replied Mac with the alacrity of a well-trained, and disciplined mechanic.

"Let her drive! The danger is past," called the commander, trying to make Major Kennedy hear amid the roar of the storm.

"But the boys," urged the leader of the expedition, fearful for the safety of the ground party.

"Impossible to do anything now," yelled the captain, using both hands to carry his words, though the major stood within two feet of him. "We will return for them as soon as this hurricane blows itself out."

As a matter of fact, the three aerial navigators, for the next hour at least, had as much as they could manage to ensure the safety of the airship. The Zero was still rising rapidly, for Captain Martin hoped by gaining altitude to reach a calmer atmosphere. For the moment, they were in the very centre of the terrible storm.

"Heavens, just look!" gasped the major, as the crackle of lightning seemed to set the atmosphere ablaze.

"We're in a sea of fire!" shouted the captain, who held on to the instrument board, but seemed dazed and bewildered by this terrifying experience, the worst he had yet encountered.

"We're bathed in it; the very heavens are on fire, Captain," exclaimed the major, glad for the moment that his two boys were at least on *terra firma*, for anything seemed better than this. "Will she catch fire, do you think?"

"The gas-bag's safe enough, Major," replied the captain. "Thank goodness, it's filled with helium. If it had been hydrogen,

she'd have burned out or exploded by this."

"And we should have fallen to the earth like——"

"Like burnt-out cinders," said the captain, thinking the same thoughts as his companion.

The major nodded, as he watched the almost continuous fire playing about the gondola, the engines, and the huge envelope. Then another terrible idea entered his mind as he caught sight of the fuel-tanks.

"And the petrol?" he asked.

"Insulated!" jerked out the captain, though he winced as he also cast a glance in the same direction. "The petrol-tanks are the only danger-spot about the Zero, but they're specially insulated with rubber sheeting. I hope they'll stand it, though we haven't too much fuel left."

They were now touching a thousand feet, but instead of reaching calmer weather the gale seemed worse than ever. And though they were still rising, they were being swept along by the gale at an enormous rate, which the captain reckoned at from

seventy to eighty miles an hour. They were thinking of the leeway that would have to be made up before they could recover the clearing, where they had left half their crew, and the shortage of petrol, when suddenly a weird thing happened.

The Zero began to lurch heavily, then to nose-dive, and finally to spin. They had reached the vortex of the monstrous air-currents which had carried them along so swiftly, not on any direct course, but in ever lessening circles. At first they had been caught in the outer fringe of the hurricane; now they had reached the very centre of the storm, and the behaviour of the airship was bewildering and amazing.

"Look out!" warned the captain. "Hold on to those guy-ropes."

But his voice was drowned amid the wild commotion of the elements. The Zero was diving and ducking, mounting and whirling all at once. Then the envelope buckled ominously, and every instant her crew believed that the stout fabric must be torn to ribbons.

"We're at the centre of a terrible whirlwind," exclaimed the major, trying to shout his words into the captain's ears, but the shrieking of the wind, as it whistled through the stays and guy ropes, carried them away into the night.

"We'll be through it directly," replied the air-skipper courageously.

"She'll split in two if we aren't," announced the major, holding on for grim life, while the nose of Zero pointed almost straight down, and the big envelope spun round and round in a dizzy maze.

With the rudder jammed and the starboard engine out of action, they were utterly at the mercy of the elements, and the big airship was merely like a straw being whirled round and round by an eddy in a stream.

But the fabric and the rigging held, and the next moment the Zero passed out of the whirl into a pocket of calm, unruffled air. In an instant she righted herself, and floated almost motionless on an even keel.

"Dead centre!" shouted the captain watching the effect of all this weird behaviour

of the elements on the various indicators.

"Wonderful!" declared the major. "What does the speedometer say?"

"Nothing," replied the captain, pointing to the little dial, for the instrument board was lit by a shaded electric flash. "But it's wrong; we're travelling at least fifty miles an hour, perhaps more. But we've a terrible curtain of wild weather all round us. We're at the very centre of a cyclone which is travelling at a fearful pace, and carrying us with it."

"I understand," replied the major, who knew something of meteorology and science. "We're confined in a close pocket of compressed air which has deranged the instruments. But how are we to get out of it?"

"We shall be out of it soon," said the skipper. "Despite the altimeter, this compressed air is taking us up. We shall be above the cyclone soon if I'm not mistaken."

Captain Martin was right. The buoyancy of the Blimp had been vastly increased by the pressure of the air. They were rising rapidly. Soon they were amid the whirl and the strife

again, but as their altitude increased they quickly soared above the storm. Then as the light of the moon burst out from the thinning clouds, they passed into an upper strata of air, above the storm, and watched with breathless interest the moving panorama of the tempest below. In another few minutes it had passed, and they sailed through the peaceful heavens, which were lit up once more by the silver light of the moon.

"That was some storm," observed the captain, a few moments later. "May we never meet another like it."

"But where are we, Martin?" asked his friend, as he peered far down to where the dark outline of the forest showed clear and distinct, and searched for some sign of the clearing.

"We may be a couple of hundred miles from our friends," replied the captain. "On the other hand, we may have blown round in a circle; I have heard of such experiences."

"I can see the sheen of a river down

yonder, cutting its way through the forest. Can it be the lagoon, I wonder?"

The captain followed the line of the major's pointing hand, saw the gleam of some waterway swollen by the torrent. Then, noting the position of the moon and stars, he returned to his little chart-room, made a few rapid calculations, reckoning driftway, the force and direction of the late hurricane, and said:

"It cannot be the lagoon. We're at any rate from one hundred and fifty to two hundred miles E.S.E. of the clearing, and what little wind there is now blowing still follows in the wake of the gale. We must find a place to land as soon as possible and carry out repairs. Meanwhile, I'll just test the port engine."

A few minutes later, from the navigating bridge the order was given:

"Clear away those guy ropes, Mac, or they'll foul the propeller. Then stand by to open up the other engine."

"Aye, aye, sir!" replied the mechanic, who, aided by the major, quickly secured

several ropes which had blown loose and were dangling about in a dangerous manner.

Soon afterwards, the port engine opened up with a burst, sputtered and crackled, then ran more smoothly, as she reached her normal revs.

"She's steering wildly!" announced the captain, as the rudder being badly jammed refused to work, and the dirigible began to make eccentric circles.

"No use!" agreed the major. "We shall have to land for repairs. "Cut her out, Mac; we're only wasting petrol."

With silent engines, the Zero was now drifting slowly further away from the clearing, while all hands were peering through the glasses, searching for some spot where it might be brought to ground.

Soon afterwards an opening in the forest appeared and, by skilful manœuvring and a judicious use of the remaining engine, they brought the Zero down and, just as dawn was breaking, managed to secure her effectively by a long stretch of cable to the stump of an oak tree on an open plain.

This tree, whose upper half had been carried away in the gale, served as an admirable mooring post, and there was plenty of room for the Zero to swing head to wind, in any direction.

There were no signs of human life visible as yet, for the herds of wild gnus, zebras, reddish-coloured antelopes, and other creatures, whose grazing they had disturbed into a precipitate flight, showed that the country was not inhabited, save by occasional hunters.

A fire was kindled, and after a hearty breakfast all hands set to work to repair the damage caused by the storm, for their anxiety on behalf of their comrades was increased by the major's declaration:

"I believe that the professor was right when he said that we were on the very edge of the Baduri country last night."

"The Baduri?" echoed the captain. "But they can't be much worse than the other cannibals."

"Ah, you don't know the Baduri, Captain Martin. They are by far the most terrible

of the forest pygmy tribes. No white man ever returned from their country. They are fierce cannibals, and have an utter contempt of death."

"But the professor and the boys have a good supply of ammunition. They can surely keep them at bay for twenty-four hours. By that time, I hope, we shall be with them again."

"Are you quite sure of your bearings?"

"Yes, to within a quarter of a degree. We shall have little difficulty in reaching the spot and finding the clearing, once we get that new propeller fixed up and the rudder serviceable. I have been all over the Zero, and there's nothing else the matter with her, that I can find."

After a hasty breakfast the trio set to work. One of the spare propellers was got out, and Mac, with the skill and genius of a Glasgow mechanic, quickly removed the broken boss and began to fix up the new four-bladed air-screw.

"You give him a hand, Major Kennedy," said the captain, "while I try conclusions with the rudder."

CHAPTER XV

THE SEARCH

THE repairing of the airship, however, proved a much more formidable task than the captain had at first contemplated. In less skilful hands the Zero might have been written off as a total loss. All that day, and half the following night, the trio worked perseveringly and patiently. The tropical sun scorched them by day, and the wild creatures of the forest, attracted by the acetylene glare, made night hideous with their horrible cries.

"Just look at the brutes!" the captain would occasionally remark, as, resting from his labour for a moment, he peered through the night at the ring of hyenas, jackals, and a host of other creatures, sniffing and howling.

Occasionally a man-eating lion would come close up. His advance was always dis-

covered, however, for the jackal utters a peculiar cry when in the presence of the king of beasts.

"Here he comes again!" the captain would shout. "Smart with that shooting-iron, Major," and a couple of shots from the heavy rifle would scatter the brutes, and the lion would retire again to roar defiance at a safer distance, making the very ground to shake with his terrible din.

Even after the propeller had been fixed, and the rudder made serviceable, minor defects and engine-trouble, resulting from the enormous strain and weather conditions to which the airship had been subjected, still further delayed their start.

There were times when the major even began to despair of saving his boys.

"Heavens, what will become of them, Martin?" he would ask again and again. "If they are attacked they cannot hold out very long, for their ammunition will soon run out, and their food supplies will be exhausted. And if the Baduri turn up what chance will they have?"

"They'll be able to put up a decent fight, major," declared the captain, anxious to raise the drooping spirits of his companion. "And the professor is with them. He knows something of life in the African forest."

"That is my only hope, Martin. If Professor Gregory had not been left behind with them I should have utterly despaired from the first. My poor boys, left to the mercy of the Baduri, with their poisoned arrows and their deadly blow-tubes, would be hopelessly outmatched."

"There now, start up that starboard engine again, Mac, will you?" the captain would request, but again and again the practised ears of the two airmen would discover fresh defects.

"She's no runnin' smoothly, sir! She'll 'conk out' or fire ef she canna' do better."

Then the troublesome engine would have to be partly taken down again, and the work re-commenced, while the major, harassed almost to distraction, would march about the glade, fretting and fuming.

At last, after a final test, there came to

his ears the thrice welcome words of Mac.

"She's awreet the noo, capt'n. She's runnin' as smoothly as oil. We can start reet awa'."

"Thank-you, Mac," exclaimed the major, gripping the black, greasy hand of the mechanic. "If we're in time to rescue them, I'll never forget the services you've rendered. But I fear it's too late—too late."

Had Major Kennedy known at that moment that his two brave boys and their guide were both in the hands of the Baduri already, awaiting at that very instant, in the silence of that strange death-chamber, the coming of the cruel Faro and his assistants to carry out their threat, his mind would probably have become unhinged. But an all-wise Providence hides from us many things which it is better for us not to know.

They were ready now, however, and, the weather being propitious for a start, they lost not a minute of the precious time, for this was the morning of the third day since the airship broke away from her moorings.

"All aboard!" cried the captain. But there was no need for the usual order, for, having brought in the second cable, the last had been noosed so that it could easily be slipped from the airship.

"Aye, aye! All aboard and ready!" responded the other two members of the party.

"Let go!"

The major, who was stationed in the nose of the gondola, slipped the cable and began to wind it in rapidly, for the last steel hawser of fine, stranded material had been wove but once round the bole of the tree.

The Zero, released from her lashings, rose steadily into the morning air, and at the same instant both engines opened up, and she sailed away, making a bee-line over the western forest.

The fresh, cool air at five hundred feet gave a new sense of life to these tired men, who had worked almost unceasingly for forty hours. Their sluggish pulses quickened, and they watched keenly every aspect of the landscape below, as they traversed over

swamp, forest and open plain, and searched everywhere for some sure landmark which would guide them safely back to the clearing.

But the country was new to them. They were navigating across the centre of an unknown continent, inhabited almost entirely by wild beasts. Not a solitary habitation had they seen where men dwelt, though they knew that those dark, mysterious forests were the abodes of strange and savage tribes.

Herds of buffaloes, zebras, giraffes, gnus and antelopes were several times observed about the little streams which wandered through the open glades. Once a herd of elephants were sighted. Two large hippopotami were noticed in mid-stream, and a white rhinoceros sauntering along the bottom of a valley.

"This is surely the hunter's paradise, Major!" declared the captain, when these creatures were sighted and the airship came down to two hundred feet, so that the observers might examine them closely.

"Yes, Martin," replied his companion.

"And at any other time we would have landed to try our luck. But now, everything else must go until we have found the boys." And the aerial navigator, who felt the loss of the three members of his crew not much less than his companion, nodded, then called for more speed from the engines.

"How many revs. are you getting now, Mac?" he asked.

"Thirteen hundert, Capt'en," came the response. "I'm feart to push 'em too hard."

A little later, however, Mac, after coaxing and nursing his babies, opened out a little more fully, and, being anxious to soothe the feelings of the major, announced—

"Fourteen hundert, sir."

"Capital" replied the captain, delighted beyond measure at this news. Then, turning to the major, he said:

"We're doing fifty miles an hour easily. We should touch the clearing in another hour."

Shortly afterwards, they passed within ten miles of the very prison-house where

their companions were awaiting the dread appearance of their executioners. Once, amid their keen searching for the clearing, they even caught sight of a shimmer of gold amid the trees far away to southward. It was the reflection of the sun's rays upon the gilded roof of the temple of the crafty priesthood, where Faro and his associates reigned over the superstitious Baduri.

"What can it be, Major?" asked the captain, wonderingly. "Surely it is the work of human hands."

"It may be the reflection of the sun upon a sheet of water, Captain," replied his companion, fixing his glasses upon the spot for a moment. "But it is so hidden by the trees that I cannot quite make it out."

"Looks more like the dome of a temple though," said the skipper. "Pity we haven't time to cruise over there and examine it."

"The clearing," interposed the major shortly. "We cannot change our course. We must get back to the clearing. Nothing else matters. We are already too late, I fear. Can you make out any landmarks

yet, Martin, which will enable you to find the clearing? The sun will set in another four hours, and, Oh, God! If my boys must spend another night in that awful spot I shall despair."

The major spoke with such feeling, and his words, and still more his strange manner, told the skipper that fatigue, nerve-tension and anxiety were making such a nervous wreck of his companion, that Captain Martin quickly turned his glasses away from the hidden city of Nophar and began to search the forest ahead of them.

A little later, a joyous cry broke from the major's lips. He had been standing forward in the bow of the gondola sweeping the horizon with his glasses, when suddenly he shouted—

"The clearing! There it is."

"Where away?" asked the captain, his hand on the steering gear.

"Over there a little to the southward. Can you see it?"

"Yes, I have it now!" responded the captain.

With a wide semi-circular sweep, the Zero came round, and five minutes later she was sailing directly over the clearing with the giant palm standing erect and calm beside the blue lagoon.

"Can you see them?" asked the captain, for the major was peering over the edge of the gondola at the ground beneath.

"Not a sign of them," gasped the older man, turning pale, and revealing to his companion as he looked towards him for an instant, a livid, haggard countenance. "But there's something uncanny about the place. Can we go lower down?"

"Better signal to them. Fire a gun! They'll hear that if they're in the neighbourhood."

The major stepped back and reached for his rifle. Seizing it, he fired and awoke the echoes of the forest. The same wild chattering of monkeys and parakeets could be distinctly heard from the airship, for the engines had been stopped, and the Zero was gradually nearing the earth. But no human voice replied to their signal.

Suddenly the leader of the expedition caught sight of the mass of bones in the centre of the clearing. The vultures and the other scavengers had done their work well. The bones of the elephant and the man-eater, with not a scrap of flesh left upon them, showed up white and horrible. The camp débris scattered about told its own story. But the major had not yet noticed the human bones of the dead Baduri scattered about the ground below the crow's nest. These were hidden from sight as yet by the foliage of the trees. But what he had already seen filled him with horror and despair.

"What's wrong?" shouted the captain, unable to leave the navigating bridge for a moment, but noticing by the horrified countenance of his companion, a few feet away, that something terrible had happened.

For answer, the major, reeling back like a drunken man towards the centre of the gondola, spoke not a word, but pointed towards the mass of whitened bones, for in his own mind, disordered by the exhaus-

tion and anxieties of the last few days, he believed that amongst that pile of whitened débris, the remains of his own brave boys would later be found.

Seeing how matters stood, Captain Martin signalled Mac to the bridge for a moment, then, springing lightly to the edge of the gondola, he looked down at the gruesome sight.

"There's been some fight, that's evident," he declared.

"There's been a massacre!" replied the major grimly.

CHAPTER XVI

A DESERTED CAMP

SCARCELY had the Zero been moored for the second time to the giant palm than the three adventurers, seizing their weapons, and led by the major, leapt to the ground, and raced to the pile of whitened bones in the middle of the clearing.

"You're too pessimistic, Major," declared the captain. "There is not a single human bone amongst them. These are the bones of a huge bull-elephant, and those farther ones belong to the lion species. They have been shot from behind the camp barricade here."

"But where are the boys?" asked the major. "Why are they not here to meet us?"

"Perhaps they are hunting in the forest and will return before evening. We'd better wait awhile."

But Major Kennedy mounted to the top of the small barricade which the others had built for defence during the stampede of the wild beasts, and raising his hands to his lips, he shouted:

"Jake! Dan! Where are you?"

But only the same continuous chatter came back from the monkeys and birds in the tree-tops. No sound of human voices broke across the glade. Then the three men fired their rifles, once, twice, and thrice. They fired singly and in unison, taking the word of command from the major. But when the reverberating echoes had ceased, no answering signal came back from the depth of that mysterious forest.

At last the major was unable to restrain his pent-up feelings. With a choking sob, he cried:

"They are lost—lost! We are too late! They have been devoured by the wild beasts, or killed by the Baduri."

There was a tense silence for a few moments. And when at last this was broken, it was Mac who spoke. He had

been keenly observant since he left the airship, and his eager eyes had searched the open glade.

"There's an uncanny-lookin' object over yonder, sir," he observed.

"Where?" asked the major.

Mac indicated, by a gesture with his rifle, the corner near the edge of the forest where stood the little group of trees in which the crow's-nest had been built and defended.

The aforesaid object was the bleached skeleton of a Baduri warrior. And close beside it were half a dozen others, for the savages had not buried their dead, having only carried off their wounded.

In an instant the major had started off at full speed towards the scene of the last combat, with the others following closely at his heels. Here the grass was taller and more rank, and the full tale of that deathly struggle with the murderous Baduri could only be understood when the spot was reached.

"Keep back, Major!" pleaded the captain, who reached the spot first. "The

place is a shambles. It will only distress you."

But this advice, though well meant, was ignored, and the next instant the major was looking down upon a veritable shambles.

"Skelètons!" he gasped. "Human skeletons this time." But he spoke more firmly now, for he felt that at last the worst was known. There could be nothing left to learn.

"Not white men's bones!" declared Mac, carefully examining the skulls, for the jackals had left sufficient traces to prove that they were all the skeletons of savages.

"What's that you say?" asked the major eagerly, and Captain Martin took up the tale where the mechanic had stopped.

"Mac's quite right. There's been some beastly scrap here, and the professor and the two boys have stood up like men. But there are no bones of white men here. They are all savages—Baduri, you call them; short dark wiry-looking fellows."

"Then, if they're not dead," said the major, still speaking calmly, although his

countenance was deathly pale, "the Baduri have carried them off as prisoners."

For another five minutes the crew of the airship raked about amongst the dêbris, noted the effects of the fire, at which the major shuddered, and remarked:

"There has been a fire here, Martin. You will remember that the Baduri are cannibals."

"But there's no sign of any burning of human flesh about the place," replied the skipper, endeavouring to his utmost to reassure his companion at every move. And further examination of the spot seemed to prove the statement. The bodies had not been burnt and eaten, at any rate.

It was while this investigation continued, and the two seniors were busy looking for some clue or message which might help them in their search, that Mac, quick to notice the slightest movement, caught a rustle amongst the undergrowth.

"Ahoy, there!" he shouted, pointing his rifle at the same instant.

The others started and looked about them.

As they did so, a dark object slipped from behind a tree and bolted. But, quick as lightning, Mac fired, and there followed a wild scream, as of a wounded savage. The mechanic had bolted into the forest and secured his victim, and was now dragging him, screaming and biting, into the open clearing.

"Keep still, you varmint," he threatened, cuffing the resisting savage, and gripping him by the throat to ward off his terrible teeth.

"Here is something which might help us, Capt'en," he said, "if only he can be made to speak."

But the savage, evidently terrified at the sight of the white men, and the airship by which they had arrived, and believing that the brother of Shinko, the great and terrible god of his people, was addressing him, ceased his struggles, bowed his head to the ground, and hid his face in terror.

Instantly alive to the possibilities of the situation, the major endeavoured to recall

all the words of the hinterland tribes he had learnt during his sojourn in Northern Nigeria.

"Who are you? Where are the white men we left here?" he demanded in a soft, suasive voice.

The savage lifted his head once or twice, but immediately he saw the airship and the face of the white god, he buried his face again so close to the ground that even by force they could not lift him.

"He doesn't understand a word," said the major at length. "And he is terrified of the airship. Bind up his wound, Martin. It's only a flesh wound on the thigh. He's not even attempting to escape now."

Strange as it may seem, this kindness in bandaging the wound from which the blood flowed freely, did more to restore the confidence of the savage, and to open his mouth than all their threats. His fear vanished and he became as trustful as a child, save that he could not look into the face of the major without trembling. What puzzled them most was that the man was

unarmed. He did not even carry the traditional knife, nor the blow-tube of the forest pygmy.

"You may go!" said the major kindly, waving his hand and pointing to the forest with such gestures that even a savage could not fail to understand. The ex-commissioner knew from his own experience that if anything were to be gained from this savage, it must be by kindness rather than by violence.

But from that moment it quickly became evident that the savage did not desire his freedom. As a matter of fact, this was none other than Inyaki, the brother of Toucan. He had watched the airship and had followed her swiftly, and believing in his innermost soul all the words which Toucan had spoken concerning the coming of the brother of Shinko and the phantom bird, he had sought to save his brother from death, and the captives who had come in the White Albatross.

Now that his fear had in some measure subsided, therefore, he began to make signs,

pointing to the forest, the sinking sun, and making the sign of the full round moon. He was in reality urging them to follow him to save Toucan and the white men from death.

It was the major who tumbled to the fellow's meaning first. After watching his gesticulations, and hearing again and again the sing-song chant, "Mola-Kwang-la-Shinko!" he said.

"This fellow has a message, Captain Martin. Of that I'm certain, although I cannot understand a word of his gibberish. It's quite unlike all the Nigerian dialects *I know*, although Shinko, a word he frequently repeats, is the name of a deity in these parts. I wonder now if he's seen the boys."

"Let me try him," said the captain.

Again they tried him, both by gesture and Nigerian dialect, and after another ten minutes the major became convinced that not only had he seen the boys but that he desired to save them, and another mysterious person whom he persistently referred to as Toucan.

"But where are they?" demanded the major.

The savage did not understand these words of the white men, and wondered why Shinko's brother could not speak in the language of the Baduri. But his persistent pointing to that part of the forest through which the prisoners had been carried off, and of which signs were in evidence by the trampling of many feet, the major at length remarked:

"There must be some settlement in that direction, Captain Martin, and the boys are held prisoners there until some special occasion, which has something to do with the sun or moon."

"Mebbe it's the feast o' the full moon the rascal's thinkin' of, sir," urged Mac.

"By Jove, you're right," exclaimed the major, wheeling round upon the last speaker. "Let me see, when is the moon at the full, Captain?"

"To-night, sir, soon after sunset."

"Then there isn't a minute to spare. The boys are to be killed, or sacrificed to

this devil of a Shinko, this very night. God, how can we save them ? "

Like a flash now the truth dawned upon the trio. This man was a faithful savage. He desired to save his white brothers, and that other person—Toucan. And despite his wound, he had stayed to tell them.

" Why, it must be so. Look at this fellow ! He knows that we understand him now, and his face is beaming. He's not half the murderous villain he seemed to be but a few minutes ago."

" But how shall we get there ? This jungle is impossible for us. And besides, he may have been sent to lure us to our death," said the captain.

But then a strange thing happened which put all their doubts as to the fellow's integrity at rest, and in one sentence, or rather in one word, showed them the very spot where the white prisoners were to be sacrificed.

Major Kennedy, fearing to be too late, and imagining that the cannibal tribe dwelt only a mile or two within the forest, showed

himself impatient to start, and urged the savage by unmistakable signs to lead the way. But the pygmy shook his head doubtfully, pointed to his own breast, then to the forest, signified a long journey by making an arc in the air, then pointing to the three white men, indicated the airship, as if to say:

"Long way—Inyaki through forest—White men travel by phantom bird."

"How far?" asked the major innocently, and immediately the savage smiled, but answered:

"Nophar!"

"Nophar?" echoed the major, starting, and in his mind there rose up instantly the wonderful stories of the hidden city of Nophar, and the golden temple, in the attempt to find which so many white men had already lost their lives.

The face of the savage beamed again as he repeated the magic word—Nophar. Then, as if to convince the travellers, he took from his thick matted hair a nugget of pure gold, which had long been hidden

there, and made signs that in Nophar there was much gold.

"Why, that must have been the place we passed some little while ago," exclaimed Captain Martin, whose voice now touched a note of excitement which it had not reached before.

"You mean that glimpse of gold we saw through the trees?"

"Yes . . . why, it's thirty miles at least, and three days' journey through the jungle. We must travel by air in order to get there. Let's cut it at once, and take this savage with us," explained the skipper.

"Come along, then. There isn't a minute to lose. See, the sun will be down in half an hour, and we may have some difficulty in finding that place in the dark."

"Come, Inyaki!" urged the major, but the savage had disappeared as mysteriously as he had come. He had already begun his long journey, and, despite his wound, he was travelling at ten miles an hour through that terrible jungle, in which no white man could have exceeded one mile.

The terrors of an airship journey were not for him. He would have gone mad with fright, and leapt overboard at the first opportunity.

Within ten minutes, however, the cables were slipped, and, with all her three brave adventurers aboard, the Zero rose above the forest as the sun's rim touched the horizon, and sailed away upon a yet more hazardous voyage towards the hidden city of Nophar.

CHAPTER XVII

A PERILOUS MOMENT

WHEN the sun dipped with tropical suddenness behind the western forest, a brief period of darkness ensued, as the Zero, with engines full out, raced to the rescue of the three captives of Shinko. Despite their exhaustion and fatigue, for they had scarcely rested from their labours for three days and nights, the crew of the airship were roused to the highest pitch of fevered excitement.

Never before had Captain Martin placed such a strain upon the two engines. Would they stand it? Everything depended upon that. But the soft purring of the "275-h.p. Eagles" told his practised ears that, so far, British steel and workmanship were standing the test.

Still the captain was not satisfied. While this bold aerial navigator pricked the chart

which lay before him, and directed the force of those mighty engines, he called repeatedly to the mechanic:

"What are they touching now, Mac?"

"Fefteen hundert revolutions, sir," would come the reply.

"Can you get anything more out of them?"

"Not another rev., Capt'en; they're on the top notch the noo."

"Keep her steady, then!"

Meanwhile, Major Kennedy paced the narrow gangway impatiently, fretting and fuming at the time which had already been wasted. In his heart he wished that he had taken the skipper's advice to cruise over the golden dome which they had passed to the southward that afternoon.

"It must have been the mysterious city of Nophar, where my poor boys are held captive, awaiting their terrible fate," he groaned.

Occasionally, he stopped his pacing and peered through his night-glasses far ahead, hoping against hope that some light or

signal from below, might herald their approach to that weird land of the fierce Baduri. But only the dark forests stretched unbroken beneath the airship, whose roaring propellers, racing through the night, must have startled the wild beasts in the jungle.

Suddenly a faint gleam of light began to glow upon the eastern horizon. He knew its significance. Turning to the captain, he exclaimed:

"The moon is rising, Martin! We shall be too late again."

"It wants another thirty minutes before the moon will be full enough," replied the navigator. "We shall be there in the very nick of time."

"But can we pick up the place in the dark, do you think?" and the major's voice was broken and agitated.

"It should be light enough in another ten minutes to pick up our landmarks," answered the skipper.

In another five minutes the outer rim of the moon appeared over the edge of the distant forest, and then the full orb

of light rose distinct and clear, flooding the landscape below with a silver radiance. Far beneath them the air was scented with the dew-laden foliage and nocturnal flowers of the tropics, and the pleasant moonlight glistened upon the waters of a quiet lagoon.

But the beauty of earth and sky were lost upon the watchers in the clouds. The hour of Shinko had almost come, and the fearful human sacrifices to this terrible deity must soon begin.

From that horrible death-chamber the three white men were even now being dragged, bound and helpless, to the altar of Shinko. A few minutes more and the propitiatory rites would have commenced.

Suddenly the dark line of the forest just ahead of the Zero broke into open country, and the major, peering right ahead, his mind and body equally alert, caught a yellow gleam.

"Nophar!" he shouted wildly, and pointed out the quivering gleam amongst the trees.

He was right, for their skilful navigator,

with unerring precision and wonderful calculations of speed, dead reckoning, and drift, had sailed the airship along that uncharted aerial route to the mysterious city of cruelty, cunning, and fabulous wealth.

"Stop her!" ordered the commander, fearful lest the speed at which they were navigating, and the wind behind the huge envelope, would carry them beyond the temple, whose dome could now be clearly seen glittering in the moonlight.

Nothing else was visible as yet, however. But the major, peering down below, fancied that the open plain beneath was filled with wild, dancing figures, about some magic ring.

"Can you make out anything, Major?" asked the captain.

"Nothing, except that the place seems alive with weird dancing shapes, as though some wild devil-worship is in progress. We must go lower down, Captain."

"Right-o! Stand by with the searchlight. That should give them some fright

until we can train something more deadly upon them."

But the major heeded not the captain's words. A terrible dread had seized him. He still feared that the same misfortune which had so continually dogged their footsteps was still at their heels.

"I cannot wait!" he cried. "It will take us half an hour to land, and the moon is already at the full."

Maddened by this fear, Major Kennedy seized three Webley repeaters, already loaded, and placed them, with a small box of ammunition, in his pocket. Then he hastily strapped the band of his aerial life-belt—a small parachute—under his arm-pits, and stood ready to leap.

"Don't jump, for the sake of heaven! The savages will only kill you," cried the captain.

"It is the only way to save them," shouted his companion, maddened and infuriated by what he had just observed in a last glimpse through the night-glasses.

Even as the older man spoke and pre-

pared to leap, a jet of flame and the report of a bursting missile from down below caused the captain himself to rush to the edge of the gondola.

"Heavens!" he gasped. "That was a grenade. It must have been the professor who threw it. They're fighting like mad down there," and leaving the major to his own impulses, he sprang to the searchlight apparatus and gripped the lever.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN THE NICK OF TIME

THE arrival of the airship at the very moment when the wild orgies of the feast of the full moon were commencing, and the terrible death-dance of the frenzied Baduri was being enacted, created a bewildering sensation.

This fearful exhibition of savage passion invariably preceded the human sacrifices which at this festival were always offered to the green-eyed Shinko.

Faro, the high priest, arrayed in gorgeous vestments, and surrounded by a phalanx of his evil-faced priesthood, already stood beside the porphyry altar of the god. At a signal from him the death-dance had suddenly ceased, and the dark-skinned warriors, holding their gleaming weapons and long shields aloft, quickly formed a wide circle about the altar and the victims.

A fierce oration, ending in a weird incantation, directed to Shinko and the moon, followed. Then Faro raised his long gleaming knife above the head of Toucan, who was to precede the white men along the dark pathway of death.

"Shinko-Mola-Kwang——" commenced the priest, glancing towards the serried ranks of the Baduri. Quickly the whole assembly took up the chant. But this time, however, the death-song ended in a fierce and broken yell—a cry of horror and dismay.

"Mazooki!" screamed the victim, wrenching free his right hand from the thong which bound him, and pointing to the skies.

Faro, utterly taken by surprise, glanced upwards, for a dark shadow had crossed the face of the moon. It was the Zero, sailing serenely in the heavens above the tree-tops, and heading straight for the scene of the execution.

But a thousand eyes had beheld the airship. With frantic cries of terror, mingled with horror and surprise, the close ranks of

the pygmy warriors had broken, and one mighty shout rent the evening air.

"The great white bird! The brother of Shinko!" they exclaimed, some in ecstasy, and others in superstitious dread.

A scene of the wildest confusion prevailed. The gleaming knife of Faro, upraised to slay the unfortunate Toucan, fell to the ground. For an instant the priest seemed paralysed. It was true then, that which had been spoken by Toucan. Here was the phantom bird from across the great desert.

In that wild moment, Faro, believing that his life was in danger, contemplated flight. His reign in Nophar had ended. Even the shifty-eyed, jealous priesthood who stood about him saw that their chief had fallen.

The Baduri had been taught to believe this wild superstition about the coming of the phantom bird. It would now be difficult to undeceive them. With their own eyes they had beheld its arrival, in the very nick of time, to save the brave-

hearted Toucan, and the white strangers whose mysterious entry into their midst had so strangely coincided with the coming of the White Albatross.

"The airship!" Jake shouted at the first sight of the Zero. Only the fact that she was drifting before the wind had prevented his sharp ears from discovering her presence before.

"Huzza!" cried Dan wildly, hoping that his voice would reach his father. But the distance was too great, though the airship was coming down.

"How can we signal her, Professor?" asked Jake feverishly.

But the professor was already engaged speaking hurriedly to a frightened pygmy warrior in his own gibberish dialect, trying to induce him to sever his bonds. But the terrified warrior was spellbound, filled with sudden awe by the appearance of this monster.

"Quick! It is the brother of Shinko! He has come to save Toucan, your chief," urged the professor.

At the mention of Toucan's name the Baduri warrior listened, and his fear in some measure departed. Toucan, moreover, was his own kinsman. He therefore rose from his prostrate position, for most of the Baduri had now thrown themselves upon the ground in fear of the approaching terror. Then the savage cut the bonds which bound the hands of the white hunter.

The next instant, using the only means at his disposal, Professor Gregory gripped his small hand-grenade, the possession of which he had still retained, withdrew the firing-pin, and hurled the missile towards that murderous group by the altar of Shinko. For the great traveller had seen the tragedy which had just taken place, and knew the counter-plot which was being hurriedly prepared.

The high-priest, recovering first from his own fright, had picked up his knife and buried it in the heart of the helpless Toucan, determined that he, at any rate, should not remain to plot. Then, holding up his hand to still the childish Baduri, he had begun

to explain that this was merely the false magic of the white men, and that Shinko had ordered their immediate death, because his real brother, the White Albatross, still remained far northward of the great desert, in the land of ice and snow.

"The brother of Shinko will not come until we are all gone, and our children are aged men. This is but an imposture. Therefore I command you, in the name of Shinko, let not the white men escape. Let them die as false Toucan has died."

It was at this moment that the professor, knowing the fickle temperament of these dark-skinned warriors, and fearing lest, after all, the crafty and cunning Faro might still encompass their death, hurled the grenade, which he had so fortunately managed to retain.

Flash—bang! This was the signal which the crew of the Zero had first picked up.

With a spurt of red flame, and a deafening report, the missile had burst, shattering the golden idol, whose jewelled head rolled in the dust, and scattering fragments of

broken steel amongst the priests, wounding four or five of them, and throwing the others into the utmost confusion.

"Bravo!" shouted Jake, unable to restrain himself any longer, for the Baduri warrior had severed the thongs of hide which bound both the lads.

"She's signalling!" cried Dan, for his eyes had been intently fixed on the airship.

"Yes, she's picked up the flash of the grenade," said the professor. "But stand ready, boys, Faro is unwounded, and is trying to circumvent us again."

Alive to the danger which still persisted, the boys picked up spears or knives which had been dropped by the amazed and dumbfounded warriors who, at this moment, were running hither and thither in wild confusion, some desiring revenge for the death of Toucan, others demanding the lives of the white men.

How the matter would have ended it is impossible to say, but the chances were still very considerably against the rescue

of the captives, when suddenly the search-light from the airship was flashed upon the ground, at the very instant when the crafty Faro, having gained the ears of a small, but desperate band of priests and warriors, determined at all hazards to avenge himself upon the white prisoners.

"Mola-kwango!" began the cry again, but it ended abruptly once more, as the flashing light from the Zero, whose engines now roared weirdly, fell upon the group, blinding them with its vivid glare, and exposing to full view their murderous intentions, as they advanced with waving swords and spears.

It needed little more to add to the discomfiture and terror of the enemy. But that little was quickly given. Seeing the peril to which their friends were exposed, for the identity of the prisoners had been already established in the minds of the crew of the Zero, Major Kennedy, in a frenzy of fear, lest after all they should be too late, had the powerful engines shut off as the Zero sailed about four hundred

feet overhead, and, unfastening the clip of his guardian angel parachute, leapt from the airship.

A horrified silence held both parties in its grip as they watched this thrilling descent.

Flashing the searchlight upon the falling aeronaut, Captain Martin himself waited breathlessly and expectantly.

For fully a hundred feet the parachutist dropped like a stone. Then, as the large envelope opened out, his speed earthward lessened, and the next moment he had landed on the ground in the very midst of the bewildered and terrified Baduri.

"Father!" cried Dan, springing forward.

But there was no time for greetings. Thrusting a Webley into the hands of the boy and another into the grip of the professor, he shouted:

"Defend yourselves!"

"Where is that villain Faro?" shouted Jake.

"There he is, racing for the forest, lads," replied the professor, shading his eyes from the glare of the searchlight and peppering

away at the retreating Faro, who was being hurriedly followed not only by his crafty associates of the priestly order, but by the frightened natives also.

The next moment, save for the body of the murdered Toucan, and several wounded priests and natives, who crawled towards the jungle, the four white men were left absolutely alone, in possession of the richest temple and city that perhaps the ancient or the modern world has ever known.

"My brave boys!" cried the major as he greeted them with outstretched hands, and then gently patted their shoulders. "What a terrible adventure this must have been!"

"You're right there, Kennedy," said the professor, coming up, after emptying his Webley at the retreating foe. "They are both brave boys, and you've reason to be proud of them. They are British to the backbone, and they've faced death more than once during the last few days without flinching."

"And you, too, Professor Gregory?"

exclaimed the leader of the expedition, loosening himself from the embrace of his younger boy, and grasping the hand of his friend.

"Yes, Father," insisted both boys, "the professor is some fighter too. We owe him our lives. He has saved us a dozen times."

"I can quite believe it," added the major. "I am more than grateful to him."

"Yes, the professor is some hand at hunting, whether it's big game or fossils," exclaimed Jake. "But when he goes on the warpath, he's simply topping. Give me the professor for a scoutmaster every time. What say you, Danny?"

"You're right, Jake. He plays the ace every time. If it hadn't been for him, we should have been like poor Toucan over there . . . dead," replied Dan.

The delight of Major Kennedy and the rest at this timely rescue can be better imagined than described. At the very moment of impending death, the boys had been snatched from a horrible fate.

"It was a miracle, Father," exclaimed the younger boy. "I shall never disbelieve in Providence again."

"In less than another five minutes we should both have been dead," declared Jake, pressing his father's hand. "How did you manage it?"

"You must thank Captain Martin and his assistant for our timely arrival, boys," replied the major. Then he told them briefly all the circumstances of the last few days, the broken engines, rudder and propeller. He described, in rapid words, how for over forty hours they had toiled without resting to make the airship serviceable; then how they had raced back to the clearing, and from thence to the city of Nophar.

"Good old Mac!" interrupted the elder boy, as he capered and danced about the broken altar.

"Did you sail past here sometime this afternoon, on your way to the clearing?" asked Dan, suddenly remembering Jake's presentiment.

"Yes, we passed about ten miles to the northward. It was then for the first time that we caught a glimpse of that golden roof over there. I thought it was a reflection of the sun's rays from some quiet, lake. But Captain Martin would have it that it was the gilded roof of some temple. He wanted to change the airship's course and to investigate, for he declared that it must belong to some hidden temple."

"Lucky you didn't come, Father," observed Dan.

"Why?"

"Because we were then held prisoners in that terrible death-chamber. There could have been no escape for us if you had come then, for we should have been murdered within those dreadful walls. But Jake declared persistently that he heard the propellers of the Zero."

"It was the will of Providence, my boy," said Major Kennedy in serious tones. "But tell me, Dan, what was this terrible death-chamber that you refer to?"

"Oh, it was too horrible, Father. It

was a golden dungeon filled with the treasures of Nophar. But I never want to hear the word gold again. I shall always associate it with that dreadful skeleton, chained to a golden pillar with fetters of gold, and with priceless jewels about its grinning face and bony shoulders."

"Skeleton?" echoed Major Kennedy; "not a white man's skeleton, surely?"

"Yes, it was the skeleton of some white traveller or explorer, but I cannot tell you now, for see, the Zero is signalling!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE FIGHT WITH THE BADURI

"TWO red flashes from the airship!" shouted the professor at this instant, for, while the others talked rapidly of their experiences, the keen African traveller had been wide awake as usual to the new danger which threatened.

Two red Verey lights fired towards the ground from the Zero, which still cruised overhead, now lit up the open glade with an angry, lurid glare. They had been fired as a warning by Captain Martin, who, doubtful of the wisdom of attempting a landing, had been scouting around, flashing an occasional light on that part of the forest into which the enemy had fled.

"They're coming back again," shouted the naturalist.

"Quick, boys!" ordered the major. "Get behind that altar, and load up. This

place will offer us some shelter. We're not out of danger yet."

"Not by a long way," observed the professor. "That rascal Faro and his priesthood have rallied the Baduri. He knows quite well that if he can only give us the *coup de grace*, he has nothing to fear from the airship. And his aim is to prevent us getting back to the Zero."

Already cries and angry yells came from the dark line of the forest, as though the enemy were preparing for a wild rush.

Dan shuddered as he thought of the terrible power of that murderous priest. But Jake, whose ardour had risen with the change of fortune, exclaimed:

"Cheerio, Dan, old fellow! We have a fighting chance now, and they won't find us such 'dud' shots if they come out into the open."

"Which they'll have to do, if they mean to attack us," declared the professor. "When they fought us before, we couldn't see them for trees."

"But the ammunition?" cried the major.

"It will not last us more than five minutes."

"Let us signal the airship to drop some cartridges," urged Dan, his quick mind realizing the danger by which they were now faced.

"I have it," exclaimed Major Kennedy eagerly, firing a couple of shots from his revolver to attract the attention of Captain Martin, who was still hovering near the edge of the forest, trying to terrify the savages by a few flashes from the searchlight and an occasional shot.

The ruse was immediately successful. The searchlight was deflected on to the little group of white men, lighting up the ground about the altar.

"Quick! Semaphore to them, Dan!" urged his father. And the younger boy, who was very proficient in this art of signalling, stepped forward into the glare and signalled quickly with his extended arms:

"Ammunition—urgent!"

The signal was as quickly understood, for within five seconds the engines opened out, and, making a rapid sweep, the airship

roared across the glade, nose-diving almost like an aeroplane, until, passing the altar of Shinko, at some fifty or sixty feet above the ground, she dropped a couple of boxes of Webley cartridges and an extra pistol.

The boxes both burst on touching the ground, and the cartridges were scattered like leaves about the glade, but not a single one exploded. They were quickly gathered and piled beside the defenders. But even as the task was being completed, the fierce death-chant of the Baduri was heard again.

Faro had banished the doubts of his followers, and had regained his ascendancy over the fierce pygmy tribe. In his cunning hands they were but as little children, swayed first to fear, then to vengeance.

"These white men are impostors," he declared. "They have defaced the altar of Shinko and wounded his priests. But a terrible vengeance is in store for them. Shinko is angry, for they have broken his image. But the real Shinko is here with us now, and he commands us to put these impostors to death."

"Mola-kwango-la-Shinko!" shrieked the priesthood, starting again that cry which always stirred the Baduri to deeds of blood and vengeance.

The white men heard it and knew what it boded. There was to be an ugly rush; they were to be swept from their defences, then murdered in cold blood. There would be no parley, no delay this time; neither would there be any quarter given or asked.

"Let them come!" shouted Jake defiantly. "We are quite ready for them."

Faro now felt his position to be so strong and secure that he even began to threaten. As the dark-skinned warriors debouched upon the plain, he fronted them and declared, his hand uplifted and his voice frenzied:

"If a single white man remains alive at daybreak, then Shinko, the green-eyed god, will be angry. He will visit us with famine and death!"

This terrible threat, coming from such a source, filled the wild Baduri with an unquenchable thirst for the blood of these

white men. Already, in their imaginings, they felt their knives plunging into the bodies of these violators of their altar. And with one fierce and horrible cry of:

"Death to the white dogs!" they advanced to the battle, waving knives, spears, and their deadly blow-tubes above their heads.

Like the roar and surge of a huge breaking wave, the wild warriors advanced. Here and there in the moonlight, the white garments of a priest or the plumed head of a chief could be noted, as the dark line swept across the plain. To their frenzied yells and shouts was added the roar of the engines overhead, as the Zero dived, flashed its searchlight or fired, in a final attempt to break those serried ranks and stop their advance.

There were but two hundred yards, however, between the edge of the forest and the altar of Shinko, where the white men, using what shelter they could, calmly awaited events.

"Reserve your fire!" ordered the major,

who had taken command of the small garrison. "Then when I give the command, let your aim be true."

"My first bullet for Faro!" declared Jake, taking aim at a white figure advancing with the rest.

A few seconds of terrible suspense followed, then, it seemed to Dan, that hell itself opened, and all the wild fanaticism of Central Africa hurled itself upon them.

"Fire!" came the order. Then immediately after:

"Rapid fire!"

A cloud of deadly arrows filled the air, while spears, knives and javelins came thick and fast about the defenders, piercing the ground or shattering themselves into fragments against that hard porphyry wall, on which the broken image of Shinko still gleamed.

But red angry flashes, spurts of flame and leaden missiles broke from the garrison, and the foremost warriors in that surging wave, with death upon their lips, leapt like wounded deer into the air, then sank

with a thud upon the ground to bite the dust.

Like the sea against a rock-bound coast, the first wave broke, swerved and scattered, terrified and bewildered by that hidden death which these strange warriors dealt out from behind the altar of Shinko. Some threw down their weapons and fled, seeking the refuge of the forest on the farther side, behind the garrison. Others, mortally wounded by the rapid and incessant fire, screamed aloud in agony.

"Shinko fights for them!" cried one savage, and the terror spread, for many believed his words. How could it be otherwise? To their simple minds these white devils, who fought with such fury behind the very altar of Shinko and swept away their bravest warriors, must be protected by the green-eyed god.

But Faro was not so easily defeated. He knew the terror which those iron tubes of flashing flame would inspire in the minds of the Baduri. Accordingly, he had arranged his forces in three waves of some two hundred warriors each. By sheer force of numbers

he meant to win. He himself led the rearmost rank, on which he had placed his hopes, while Mitaka, his assistant, led the second.

"Beaten 'em, by Jove!" exclaimed Jake, rising from his kneeling posture behind the base of Shinko's column.

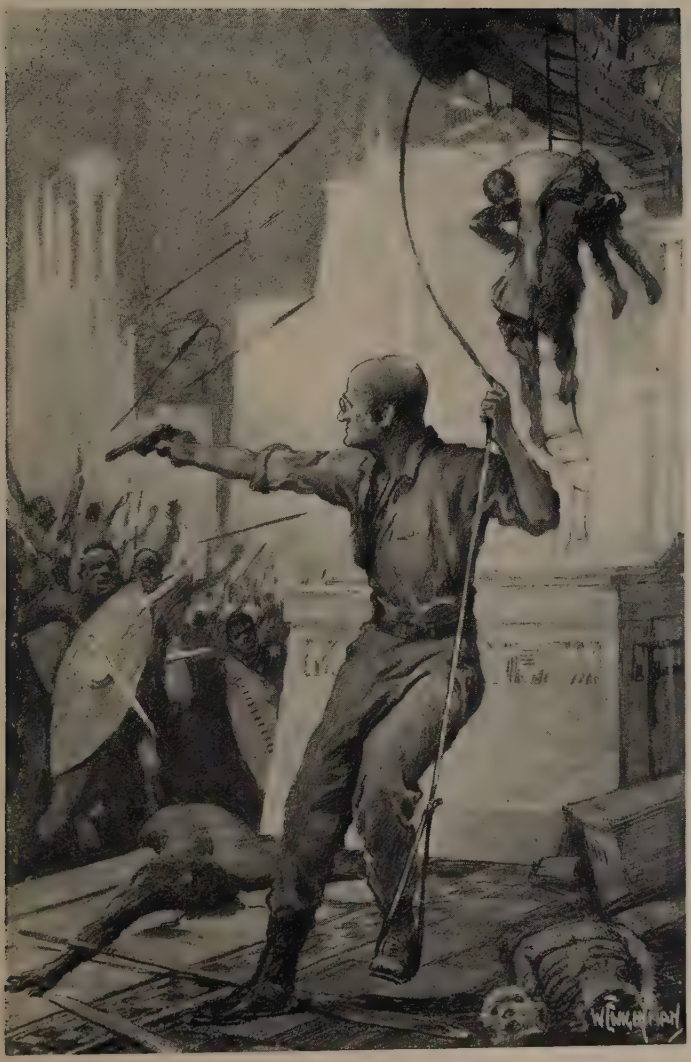
"Keep down!" ordered the professor sternly. While the major announced:

"Here comes the second line! Fire!"

That instant a pointed missile came hurtling through the air, and Jake, who had thus foolishly exposed himself, fell to the ground, for a javelin had pierced his right shoulder.

Three weapons only spoke this time, for one of the defenders was *hors de combat.* There was no time, however, to attend to his wound, nor to ascertain whether the javelin had been dipped in poison, for the second wave of leaping, shouting, thrusting savages was upon them.

"Rapid fire!" came the order. But even the professor began to doubt this time whether they could face this prolonged



"'Take that, you black devils, and that!' he hissed, emptying two chambers of his Webley."

ordeal. At this moment they needed every weapon they could muster, but poor Jake, writhing in pain, could neither withdraw that terrible javelin, nor give a hand against the enemy. Had he not fallen well behind the jutting pedestal of Shinko, he must have been killed instantly. This time, surely, Shinko had saved the lad's life.

The second wave of infuriated savages, led in person by the priest Mitaka, now broke over the garrison. I say broke, because, while they were yet some fifty yards distant, the captain of the airship, seeing the deadly peril which now threatened his companions, zoomed low down above their heads, and hurled a couple of grenades into the ranks of the Baduri.

Terrified by the roaring engines, blinded and wounded by those fearful bursting grenades, the savages broke badly, and the full force of their attack was weakened, or the heroic defenders would have been utterly wiped out.

"Bravo, Captain Martin!" shouted the major, as he waved his thanks to the bold

aerial skipper, then emptied his magazine into the disorganized ranks, who now swept over and past them in wild and impotent rushes, wounding the professor slightly in the left arm.

But further resistance was now becoming impossible. They had fired so fast, loaded and reloaded so rapidly, that their ammunition was nearly expended, and the third great wave, under the command of Faro himself, was about to be launched from the edge of the forest.

"Heavens, will it never end?" murmured Dan, sick to death of the terrible slaughter, and feeling faint and exhausted from the effects of his previous wound and its succeeding fever.

"Cheer up, Danny," said his father. "They will get tired of it soon. Then the Zero will land, and we will get away from this terrible spot."

But even as he spoke he looked into the eyes of the professor, and for the first time he thought he read there a confirmation of his own hopelessness.

The professor did not speak, but nodded in the opposite direction to which the broken waves of men had receded. Alas, his own fears were realized. Mitaka, the white-garmented priest who had led the second wave, was endeavouring to reform his shattered men for an attack on the rear of the garrison when the final attack should be launched by Faro.

"You're wounded, Professor!" exclaimed his friend, noting how his comrade gripped his left arm as if to staunch a flow of blood.

"What does it matter, Kennedy?" returned the naturalist, with a significant glance at the enemy, by whom they were now surrounded. "Another five minutes will end it."

CHAPTER XX

A THRILLING ESCAPE

THE major's heart sank at these words. He had only come in time, then, to die with his boys. Still, while there was life there was hope, and it was unbecoming a British soldier to despair, even in the face of such desperate odds. He would array his scanty forces, meet the double onset, and if it must be so, they would all die at their posts. Jake should face about and check the advancing Baduri, who were about to attack them from the rear.

No sooner had he settled his plan of campaign than he shouted:

"Jake, Jake!"

A faint moan came from somewhere near the base of the pedestal. The lad, hidden there in the dark shadow, unnoticed by his companions during that terrible mêlée, now heard his name called, and tried to answer.

"Here!" he murmured faintly.

"Oh, Father, Jake is wounded and dying!" exclaimed Dan, hearing the faint moan, and half stumbling over the prostrate form of his brother.

"Wounded?" echoed the major, from the other side of the altar.

"Yes, come quickly! Help me to withdraw this javelin."

In an instant, both the major and the professor were tending the wounded lad. The javelin was withdrawn and the wound rudely bandaged, so that the bleeding might be stopped. But only a few seconds could be spared for a delicate operation that needed half an hour, for the wound could neither be examined nor cleansed.

Defeat, despair, and death now only seemed to remain, and in the father's heart there welled up a bitterness that was indescribable. He had been responsible for bringing his boys here, and now he felt himself guilty of their impending death, which it seemed nothing could avert.

How gladly at that moment would he

have died for them, if only their young lives might be spared! But no, this was the end of their adventures. That wild yell near the edge of the forest, quickly answered by a similar outburst from the other side of the glade, told him that the professor's forebodings were only too true. In a few minutes it would all be over.

If only the airship could have landed for a moment, they might have scrambled to safety. Even now it zoomed above their heads, only some seventy feet away, but the third wave was rising to destroy them.

While he thought thus, Dan's quick wits, sharpened by the intense excitement of the moment, rose to the occasion.

"The airship is signalling again, Father," he cried. "Look, there is a chance yet."

The two white men looked up. The Zero had shut off her engines, and was drifting at some ten miles an hour across the centre of the glade. At every yard she was dropping, her gas-bag was being deflated, and Captain Martin was signalling wildly by morse lamp.

"What is he saying, Dan?" asked his father.

"Come aboard, quickly. . . . I am lowering the rope-ladder!"

"We can never reach it," moaned the leader, thinking of Jake.

"It is our only chance, Major," exclaimed the professor, jumping at the idea. "Anything is better than being left in the hands of these murdering savages. Quick, the devils are coming! Carry up Jake, when the rope touches us. Then Dan must follow, and I will hang on to one of the other ropes he is lowering, and blaze away my last cartridges."

"Mine is the post of danger, Professor Gregory," insisted the major, almost sternly.

"Don't stop to argue, my friend," urged the professor. "If Jake is to be saved, you must carry him up. With my wound I cannot do it, but I may be able to scramble up after you. Hurry, there is not a second to waste. Here comes the airship with the trailing ropes, and yonder, listen to that!"

"Shinko, Mola-kwango!" began the ter-

rible death-chant again, this time from every side of the glade. The last great attack was in progress.

It was now or never, for should the gas-bag be rent with a cloud of javelins and spears, there would be little chance of escape for anyone.

"Quick, Dan!" shouted his father as the rope trailed by.

Dan sprang up into the air, reached the end, and began to clamber up the swaying line, having run out some dozen yards to meet it. The major, having lifted the helpless Jake upon his shoulder, stumbled blindly forward, leaving his spare Webley with the professor, who fired rapidly at the oncoming savages.

Even then the major, encumbered as he was, would have failed to catch the rope as it swung by, with the Zero looming thirty feet above, but the naturalist, still firing with his right hand, grabbed the swaying rope-ladder with his wounded left, and held it for an instant, while the major gripped it and slowly began to mount.

Dan was already aboard the gondola, and was firing rapidly at the infuriated mass, now almost abreast of the naturalist, whose fate seemed surely sealed.

"Quick, below there!" shouted Captain Martin to the professor. "Hitch on to that second rope. If the devils rip the gas-bag we're done!"

The professor looked up. The airship was passing, for though the engines were silent she had headway, and the wind drift was considerable. He feared to overload and strain the ladder, up which the major was still struggling. But when he saw the second rope, which the skipper had hurled from the rear of the Zero's gondola, his eyes brightened.

"Cheerio!" he shouted and waved his hand. Then, coolly stooping to pick up the broken and bejewelled head of the green-eyed Shinko, which had lain all this while shattered upon the ground, he made ready to leap for the second rope, even as a couple of fierce-eyed warriors dashed at him with their gleaming spears.

"Take that, you black devils, and that!" he hissed, emptying two chambers of his Webley direct in their foaming, frothing faces. They were his last cartridges, and he hurled his pistol at the advancing mass. Then he sprang for the rope, seized it, and swayed perilously in the air.

"Mola-kwango! Slay him!" urged a stentorian voice at that instant, and half a dozen more Baduri leapt at the rope.

But at that instant the engines opened out with a roar, the horizontal rudders were deflected, and the Zero began to soar outward and upward, for a cloud of javelins and spears were being hurled, not only at the swaying man with the jewelled Shinko under his arm, but at the huge envelope of the Zero, which showed phantom-like above their heads.

"The phantom-bird! Slay the phantom-bird!" shouted the infuriated Faro, urging his followers to pierce the fabric of the balloon with their weapons.

But the major and Jake having reached the edge of the gondola, were helped over

the side. Then, while the professor still coolly climbed out of danger, a spirited rifle-fire crackled from the Zero, and a few minutes later, after being madly pursued by the wild tribesmen across the glade, the airship, herself wounded by several javelins and spears, sailed serenely over the forest and all her crew safely aboard.

The first consideration now was the wounded men; the second the wounded airship.

While Major Kennedy, therefore, attended to the wounds of Jake and the professor, first cleansing them, then applying poison antidotes, and clean bandages, Mac, leaving the engines running half speed, under the care of Dan, swarmed up the guy ropes, and quickly applied temporary patches to the leakages in the gas-bag, until they could find a safer landing-place for more permanent inspection and overhaul.

Then, for several hours, the wearied crew of the Zero rested and slept in turns, amid the cool, invigorating breezes at two thousand feet, drifting pleasantly, for their store

of petrol was almost exhausted, and the question of finding a fresh supply in this land of jungle, forest, and plain was deferred until the morrow.

Dawn came at last, and far from the land of the Baduri they found a pleasant open glade where, beside a few rude huts, a milder people dwelt, who spoke the dialect of Northern Nigeria.

Here the explorers landed, and here they remained for two whole weeks, repairing the damaged Zero, and making friends with the natives, who brought them ready supplies of milk and food, nuts and corn.

And here, when their wounds were sufficiently healed, they hunted the elephant, the wart-hog, the zebra, the gnu, the tall giraffe, and the graceful spotted antelope. They followed the spoor of the rhinoceros, trapped the cayman, and the lordly hippopotamus, for this was the hunter's paradise. Only Jake could not follow the sport, for his bandaged shoulder and painful wound made it impossible for him to leave the neighbourhood of the camp.

Then one morning the question of their return was discussed. Mac had declared in answer to the major's question:

"Is the airship ready?"

"The Zero is ready to carcumvent the warrld, sir, and her engines are pairfect. But she canna' cross the great desert without more petrol and oil."

"What do you propose, Martin," asked the major.

"We must run to the coast, or to one of the trading stations on the Niger River, sir, and collect enough fuel to carry us back to Algiers. There, we can easily refill, and reach England."

"Then we will start at dawn to-morrow! Better get all the ivory and specimens aboard to-night," said the major, for the professor, now that his adventures with the Baduri were over, quickly forgot all about them in his happy search for African fauna and flora, geological conformation, bone-beds of prehistoric animals, and the like.

So, on the morrow, they started for the coast. But, before they reached it, they

touched at a trading post on the lordly Niger, secured supplies of fuel for part of their ivory, visited a Government station, where Major Kennedy had once been His Majesty's Commissioner for the district.

There upon a lonely grave, where rested the mother of the two brave boys, they placed a wreath of laurel and cypress, upon the white cross under the spreading baobab tree. Then, with sad hearts and aching spirits, next morning, they set a course for home.

On the morning of the second day, as they sailed once more across Central Africa, watching the swiftly-changing scene of forest, plain and swamp—watching it with ease from an arm-chair two thousand feet above the ground—they caught a gleam of gold amid the shimmer of the palms and giant cedars.

"It is the golden city of Nophar!" declared the professor, for Captain Martin had slightly altered his course, in order that upon the chart he might mark more exactly the site of this hidden city.

They rose from their deck chairs to look at it. It aroused their curiosity but slightly, however, for, when Professor Gregory, with a humorous twinkle in his eyes, turned to the boys and observed:

"What about the gold of Nophar; why have you left it behind, boys?" Dan shrugged his shoulders, and turned away his head. He would not even look at the golden dome, now fast receding in the distance. But Jake replied:

"Life and liberty are better than gold, Professor! Have you forgotten the white man's skeleton in the chamber of gold?"

"Yet you brought away the jewelled head of the green-eyed god, Professor!" observed the captain, who had been listening to the trio.

"Yes, it may help to destroy their devil-worship and cruel sacrifices," returned the other. "And if I am not mistaken, it will more than repay the expenses of this great adventure."

So they sailed northward and homeward, crossing again the great Sahara, resting a

whole day at Algiers, and, on the sixth morning after leaving Nigeria, they sighted their native land.

"Old England!" shouted Dan excitedly.

"Yes, give me Old England every time," said Jake, straining his eyes to catch a glimpse of the Devonshire coast. "There is no place like home."

So the hidden city of Nophar, with its golden temple, its uncounted stores of earthly treasures, but its dark and villainous priesthood, and its terrible dungeons where dead men's bones whiten amid its ghostly wealth —these things still await the adventurous traveller, who is willing to enter that zone of mystery and death.